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Thesis/Project

DIVINE DIVERSITY: THE CHURCH'S CHALLENGE OR GOD'S GREATEST IMAGINATION

BY

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"The things that we share in our world are far more valuable than those which divide us."

Donald Williams

INTRODUCTION TO

Divine Diversity: the Church's Challenge or God's Greatest Imagination?

I understand the meaning of Kwok Pui Lan's assertion that "the struggle to know" can take years, "because first you have to spend years learning what others told you is important to know, before you acquire the credentials and qualifications to say something about yourself."¹ It has indeed taken years for me to know that I have something important to say and that my experience counts.

This thesis is a testament to my struggle to say something important that counts—to articulate a holy hunch—that began in my biological family and larger community. There, I was simultaneously energized and drained by celebrating and managing the differences that could have divided us or united us. My life, therefore, has been shaped by difference, and I have come to see both paradox and possibility in how the diversity of human differences—in all their permutations—is pointing us toward a deeper meaning of the pluralism that both confounds and surrounds us. This holy hunch has grown into a personal and political theological passion about the nature of God and humanity.

This holy hunch has grown into a conjecture about the nature and mutuality of God and humanity, ultimately as seen through the lens of

incarnational theology. My theological studies, informed by my ministerial practice, have led me to propose that ***the diversity found within humanity is both intentional and incarnational, and can provide an embodied means to genuine community, because it is the essence of and a gift from God.*** I also believe that incarnational intentionality exists in all of creation, though I will concentrate here on diversity's effect on and invitation for humanity.

I have begun to see the world in this way as I have become increasingly aware of the diversity that has surrounded me, an awareness that has been magnified by the realization that my particular and positive take on diversity and the incarnation was anything but a universally held construct. I came to realize that the most common ways of describing the God-world relationship and of understanding incarnational theology were different than the epiphany taking shape in my own spirit.

In this thesis project I will examine both incarnationalism and diversity in contrast to a more traditional notion of both terms. I will fully engage a notion of the incarnational and the diverse in the context of our changing understanding of the world around us. Here is how this holy hunch began to take form.

My Ongoing Social RE-location

In 1959, after relocating from Detroit, Michigan to Napa, California, I overheard my parents talking about which church we should join as a family. My Serbian Orthodox mother lamented the two-hour distance to a Serbian Orthodox congregation. My Methodist father easily found a Methodist church

within two miles of our home. He concluded as patriarch that ease of access should trump belief. And so it was. Proximity became praxis and the decision was made to raise me in the Methodist faith--well, *mostly* Methodist.

Our home was an exercise in diversity. We were Serbian, Welsh, Orthodox, Methodist, middle class, educated; ours was a home where at least five languages were spoken. I knew nothing of "diversity" as either word or construct; I only knew family, worldwide family. Through this immigrant lens, my worldview became one of cultural mobility combined with, as Christopher Duraisingh calls it, "the illustrative and creative presence of other."²

In those early years I thought everyone was my neighbor—and thankfully still do. My mother swallowed America whole, modeling for us an eagerness to know and understand American culture, and the hopes of all our neighbors who, like us, had come from somewhere else. I was naïve enough to think everyone thought like me and like us. It should be noted that my mother's idealism was earned at a great price. Her grandmother, mother and three aunts were brutalized in the Serbian concentration camps that preceded World War I. Only three of the five would survive, each irrevocably changed. My great grandmother spent her final years in a nursing home where at night she would dress the other female patients in men's clothing to protect them from the soldiers that still haunted her. Despite such a traumatic experience they did not become bitter but continued to believe in the power of hope and the intrinsic goodness of people.

I was therefore raised to believe that people unite because of our shared differences not despite them. I believed difference was a source for sharing, not dividing. I understood that we had places where we Serbians gathered to enjoy each other's contextual company. And yes, Detroit had and still has neighborhoods populated primarily by one ethnic group. But because we had settled in America, our positions and experiences of being immigrants held us in common with one another across ethnic divides, and brought a certain vitality and deeper meaning to our gathering. We were clear we had settled *in* America, not settled *for* America. Settling can refer to something being inferior to something else. Settling for us meant that we made it our home; choosing it proudly.

I soon experienced that this was not necessarily a shared attitude. Even as I child I observed that some of my neighborhood playmates were being indoctrinated against mixing (Catholic children playing with Protestant children, and vice versa.) In those days it was subtle enough to overlook. By the time I was about ten years of age I began to see that proximity was no longer an experienced praxis of community because it seemed a doctrine of difference had entered the mix. Into my world, where difference was a positive, instead "difference" intruded, and was being taught as a point of caution. I made this observation quite accidentally.

After inviting several friends to my Methodist church I was informed that the parents of my Catholic friends would not allow their children to go to church

with the Methodists, or with the Lutherans, and none accepted the Seder dinner invitations from Jewish family across our street. I think it peculiar even in retrospect that children would be so acutely aware of religious difference. My family said yes to all such invitations, displaying an attitude and intention which continues to inform my pan-spiritual faith today.

I found it troubling that neighbors no longer rejoiced in the common ground of being immigrants. The need to celebrate commonness was overpowered by the need to cluster into religious groups. What drew us together was now pulling us apart, and I watched my mixed neighborhood begin to change. Rooted, it appeared, in religious interpretation, the Lutherans hung with the Lutherans, the Catholics with the Catholics, and the Jewish neighbors grew isolated. My Methodist naiveté taught me that all such division could be supplanted if only we would go to breakfast together after church or synagogue.

My neighborhood appeared to be a reflection of what was happening in other locations. I just didn't know it at the time. As far as I could observe, we all might have gotten along fine were it not for theological and ideological difference. Diversity was becoming a dirty word I didn't know existed.

With adulthood came an increased realization of the discomfort felt by some people when so called "foreigners" continued moving into our neighborhoods. In hushed tones I heard conversations about the foreigners buying the homes next door and changing the composition of "our" schools

and “our” churches. Even use of the term “foreigners” can be a sadly normative (acceptable) way of discriminating against difference, and demonizing diversity—whether in race, religion, culture, class, gender expression or sexual orientation. I thank God and my mother for instilling in me the belief that diversity is an example of what is “right with this picture” not “what is wrong with it.” I continue to rejoice in my own particularities, that of being white, lesbian, feminist, Christian, pan-spiritual (having a faith informed by multiple traditions), being a liberation theologian, and a daughter, a spouse, a mother, and a grandmother.

As with any question taking root in a person’s consciousness, one question often leads to a second which leads to a third, and so forth. How can a nation such as the United States, settled by immigrant peoples from around the world dare feel a sense of proprietary suspicion when diversity comes to town? Diversity is the town. Why does society begrudgingly try to make the best of diversity through “tolerance” rather than celebration of difference? That is backwards. What does it say about us that we have essentially invented dogmas of difference, dogmas of separation? And isn’t the larger question what these dogmas do to separate us from God?

I believe the phenomenon observed in my neighborhood had its roots and its future in the well-meaning Christian church. Historically, the church catholic split into hundreds of distinct religious denominations with additional divisions along ethnic and class groupings. We have become experts at

division, when our ultimate source of unity is our common status as children of God. This reality is mind boggling to me. The Christian church was founded on the ideals of one body. Diversity is very much a Christian experience. Jesus taught inclusion and yet here we are, suffering with a sort of collective delusion.

Repositioning Diversity and Incarnation

As I approach the goal of repositioning diversity, my first premise is that there exists a mystical opportunity and critical need to re-imagine diversity and difference as incarnational: a concrete illustration of God immanence. It is my belief that we have been blind to God's immanence (the view that God is present in and with creation) and that our blindness has resulted in our missing the beauty and intentionality of the creative order embodied in the God-world relationship. I further propose that the incarnation was not a singular event: The epiphany taking shape in my spirit sees Jesus as a particular example of the truest potential (of divinity and service) present in humanity, not the one and only example. In other words, I see each person as a unique and particular incarnation of Creator God. Moreover, it is this incarnational infrastructure that can become a revolutionary and liberatory tool for understanding the plural condition of our time. Incarnational diversity illuminates what I call "God's on-purpose architecture," and becomes another way we encounter God in the world.

My second premise is that incarnational diversity is the intentional way God works in, with, and through us all. Said differently, when God does what

God does in the world, God does it through you and through me, through our unique gifts and through the particularities of our personality, identity, context, experience, lived expression, and free agency. Conversely, when you and I do what we do in the world, we do it either in harmony with the God presence within us or we make choices consciously outside of the God presence within us.

My third premise is that incarnational diversity can become a powerful way for humanity to more fully encounter and embody God. In this premise I use the term “embody” to re-imagine the feminist ideal of embodiment.

Embodiment in this framework would now include theology’s focus on food, shelter, water, companionship *as well as* the sacred role and divine status of all bodies. This can inform an ethic of global community, one that expands and advances God’s mystical body and one that cares for and privileges *all* bodies not just *some* bodies. When referring to an expansion of God’s mystical body I mean to stretch it beyond the Christian “body of Christ” metaphor (1 Cor. 12:27) to a universal mystery through which all humanity is called to co-create a more just world.

My fourth premise is that incarnational diversity can inspire and become the means to help us engage God’s mission of cooperation, justice, and reconciliation. Incarnational diversity is naturally cooperative, for example, and as such is evidenced within in bio-diversity. Diversity within biological systems is understood by science to be proof of its health, with lack of diversity understood as proof of its decline and or disease. I submit that the same is true for humanity

and I propose that the world is being invited to cooperate and to co-create safe space for the communion of all beings.

My last premise is that diversity is the embodied catholicity of the in-breaking of the “kindom³” of God. Diversity need no longer become a source of division but rather a call to the church and the world, whereby living incarnationally asks us to make decisions that acknowledge and privilege the presence of God in each person, and to see and know that each person is holy—starting with ourselves. Holiness begins with us as individuals living incarnationally, and it spreads to the holy “we,” where all of us purpose to live harmoniously together.

I believe the church writ large and the world is being called to a new and collective consciousness, one where diversity provides the source of a new core competency (a skill or ability), and a new sense of what it means to be God’s people.

These premises will become more evident in the chapters and illustrations that follow, as I look at how diversity has been misunderstood and underutilized by the church and the world. As I see it, diversity is divine by nature and a means to human flourishing. At this time in our human and earth history, divine diversity is both our challenge and God’s greatest imagination.

"A lot of mistakes were made before the church figured out how best to describe Jesus Christ."
 Bruce L. Shelley

Chapter 1

Incarnational Theology and Its Newest Development: Hiero Diversity

In order that we might re-imagine the nature of diversity as incarnational, it is necessary to also re-imagine the classical way of understanding the incarnation. To that end it is helpful to review the genesis of incarnational orthodoxy. After such a review, I will argue that Jesus was but one example of the Creator's incarnation and should not remain the only example of the human immanence of the divine. Given that assertion, I further submit that the church catholic has missed the *catholicity* of the incarnation. The church has absolutized and canonized Jesus as the only person worthy of claiming a divine and an incarnational heritage. I believe each of us is an instance of incarnation.

The uniqueness claimed by Christianity as one of its central doctrines is the construction that God is embodied in one place and one place only: in the man Jesus of Nazareth. He and he alone is "the image of the invisible God" (Col. 1:15). According to this belief, the source, power and goal of the universe is known through and only through a first century Mediterranean Jewish carpenter.

"The creator and redeemer of the fifteen-billion-year history of the universe, with its hundred billion galaxies (and their billions of stars and planets) are available only in a thirty-year span of one human being's life on planet

earth. The claim, when put in context of contemporary science, seems skewed, to say the least.”⁴ I find it preposterous to herald Jesus for his solo incarnational status at the expense of heralding the harmonious way Jesus lived his incarnation. Jesus’ life points us to perhaps the greatest example of a human being living out of complete relational harmony with his creator.

So how did we arrive at the classical notion that the incarnation was realized only in Jesus of Nazareth? Classical incarnational theology is the area of study dealing with the coming of God to be with us in the person of Jesus. Historically and linguistically, the verb *incarnate* is formed from the Latin roots *in*, meaning “into,” and *carn*, meaning “flesh.”⁵ In other words, it literally means to “in flesh” something or in this case “in flesh” someone. The word *incarnate* also carries a figurative meaning of putting an abstract concept or idea into a concrete form. That, after all, was the goal of early Christian writers, placing the divinity of Jesus of Nazareth into concrete form.

Within the Christian church, incarnation is the term used to describe the concrete and exclusive coming of God in Jesus to be one of us. As the opening sentences of John’s Gospel put it, “the Word became flesh and lived among us.” This simple statement is cited as one biblical basis for what has come to be a cornerstone of Christian belief.

This so-called doctrine of the incarnation is as much an ideology as it is a matter biblical interpretation. Its roots grow deep within our history.

Shortly after the turn of the second century, Pliny the Younger, governor of Bithynia in Asia Minor, consulted Emperor Trajan about the rapidly spreading Christian “superstition” in his district, asking him what he should do about it. By interrogating a few people, Pliny learned that “on an appointed day,” Christians habitually met before daybreak and recited a “hymn to Christ, as to a God.” These hymns, which go back to the earliest days of Christianity, sharply contradict the popular notion that the doctrine of the incarnation is only a brainchild of fourth-century theologians playing irrelevant word-games. This is one reason the orthodox party eventually triumphed over the Arian controversy: Athanasius simply argued theologically what the church had been singing for two centuries.⁶

In this letter, written in Greek around 350, Athanasius argues for the divinity of Christ on soteriological grounds (pertaining to the doctrine of salvation), while affirming the full humanity of Christ. He wrote, “Being God, he became a human being: and then as God he raised the dead, healed all by a word, and also changed water into wine. These were not the acts of a human being. But as a human being, he felt thirst and tiredness, and he suffered pain. These experiences are not appropriate to deity.”⁷

Yet, forty years earlier, Arius asserted that God is unchangeable, lest he ceases to be God. For Arius, the fact that God cannot change is itself a powerful argument against the incarnation.⁸

These are just two examples of writings that explore and debate the divine nature of Jesus Christ. Historically, many theologians have contributed to incarnationalism: Arius, Origen, Tertullian, Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria, Leo the Great, Apollinarius of Laodicea, Ignatius of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, Gregory of Nazianzus, Anselm, Augustine and even Martin Luther, though the controversy

was less active in his time. The conversation regarding the nature(s) of God and Christ began long before our birth and will likely continue long beyond our death.

The trinity, as well as the incarnation, is also taught as an exclusive doctrine, referring to the holy and symbiotic relationship between God the Creator, the Holy Spirit and one other human: Jesus of Nazareth. Through this lens, Jesus earns his identity as God's only begotten child. There are many Christians who have accepted the idea of God revealing God's self exclusively in the person of Jesus, without questioning the nuts and bolts, or the audacity and sexist nature of such a claim. Can only men represent divinity?

The late Mary Daly thought it increasingly evident that exclusive male symbols for the ideal of "incarnation" would no longer do. Exclusive male symbols for God are both inaccurate and unjust. "As the uniquely masculine image and language for divinity loses credibility, so also the idea of a single divine incarnation in a human being of the male sex may give way in the religious consciousness to an increased awareness of the power of 'being' in all persons."⁹ Daly conceded that symbolism such as the incarnation may be needed in the future, as long as we can find an equitable path to and from such a symbolism. I would like to think she would be pleased at the letting go of the solo and exclusive male model, though I'm reminded that my thesis would only go half the distance for Mary Daly since it proposes a universal and not a female-only incarnational model. We have to understand that our names and

symbols for God's-self are just that, symbols. Human-made names for a Divine Mystery exceed our human's ability to represent it in language or symbol. Essentially we have erred by worshipping our own linguistic symbols for God, and forgotten they are not God.

Ivone Gebara believes that to affirm the incarnation, or the bodiliness, of the divine does not necessarily require that Jesus have some unique metaphysical character. "Jesus is also 'our Sacred Body.' For this reason, the incarnation, the presence of the greatest of mysteries in our flesh, is more than Jesus of Nazareth. In this sense, we could say that Jesus is for us as a metaphor of the divine presence, the unfathomable mystery, the unutterable in the human flesh in which we are all included."¹⁰ Gebara takes this stance because "a Jesus who can no longer be affirmed as a superhuman being seems to lose his power to move us."¹¹ Laying aside Jesus' isolation as the only begotten, a doctrine of incarnational diversity liberates even Jesus. The spotlight can move to his ministry example and not his isolated metaphysical nature.

John Dominic Crossan helps us understand why the biblical authors were interested in "positioning" Jesus as the one and only son of God. The writers wanted Jesus to be seen as the person destined to run the world by ensuring he was understood, for example, as the product of divine parentage. In the pre-Enlightenment world, "Jesus' [virgin birth] was a claim that not Caesar but Christ is what God looks like in sandals."¹² By positioning Jesus of Nazareth as the divine son of God as well as the messiah, the authors were displacing Caesar,

and giving God a different human presentation. Claims such as this in the ancient world were often more formulaic and definitely more strategic than they were historical.

Jewish theologian Amy Levine explains one such formula. "Alexander the Great, Plato and Jesus needed to have had some sort of miraculous portent at birth."¹³ Matthew's gospel took literary, not historic license, in having a star travel and stop over the house where Jesus is to be born. Matthew's writerly prerogative was to use the motif of astronomical anomaly to indicate symbolically the divine immanence in the event of Jesus' birth. By telling the story in this manner, Jesus is presented historically as the only fully human and fully divine man.

Even today, it is not necessary to write off the divinity of Jesus, demoting him, as it were, to only human. I am interested not in demoting anyone but in promoting the God in everyone.

I am inspired to action and relationship when I hear Jesus described as modeling a perfected harmony with God. By revisiting the stories of his ministry, such descriptions invite me to follow a similar path. When the crucifixion is no longer explained as divine substitution for the sinfulness of humanity, but rather as the standard outcome for a political subversive, I am liberated by rational hope in my own divine purpose. Jesus becomes worthy of praise and devotion because of the all-out way he lived his ministry, as well as his embodied relationship with both the Creator and Holy Spirit. This is why I identify as a

Christian, not because a ransom has been paid for my wretchedness. No one is wretched and in need of saving within a model of incarnational diversity. We are all beloved. Belovedness is a key to diversity and vice versa.

To be clear I am not interested in tossing out or doing away with the divine parentage of Jesus simply because he was not the product of a virgin birth and because a star did not actually hover over his supposed birthplace, wherever it may have been. I believe that Jesus is indeed the product of a divine Creator the distinction being so *are we all*; that God has incarnated an aspect of the God self into all humanity, Jesus included.

Bishop John Shelby Spong is on record as not wanting to preserve the classical doctrine of the incarnation. He comes to an appreciation for a reasonable genesis of the doctrine seeing that Jesus means love—divine, penetrating, opening, life-giving, and ecstatic love. “Such love is the very essence of what we mean by God. God is love. Jesus is love. God was in Christ. This was the experience that sought to find verbal forms in such creedal concepts as the Holy Trinity, the incarnation, and the virgin birth.”¹⁴ So transformational was the experience of Jesus’ life that it is understandable his disciples would inflate the story. The essence of his ministry was one of complete synchronicity with the Creator, something we can admire and aspire to without the need to believe he was born of a virgin.

Sally McFague has also reconnected the dots of classical incarnational theology. She writes, “In Christianity, the God-world relationship is understood in

light of the incarnation. Jesus is the lens, the model, through which Christians interpret God, the world and themselves."¹⁵ McFague sees the incarnation as opportunity for continuity though, not identity with, the Creator when she adds, ".... In this view, the world is not just matter while God is spirit; rather there is a continuity (though not an identity) between God and the world."¹⁶ She is responsible for the metaphor of God as body or matrix, with each of us as part of that body. It seems a short trip traveling from the metaphor of God's body as matrix to a re-visioning of a universal incarnation. What McFague posits as metaphorical, I submit as literal.

I propose that the God-world relationship modeled and purposed by the incarnation offers both continuity and identity. Jesus modeled much more than a solo franchise; rather he modeled the fullness of mutuality between himself and our creator, modeled in earnest for us all. It is on this point that diversity emerges to become an aspect of a universal incarnation. Diversity, incarnation, divine parentage and the mutuality of God and humanity are the concepts I wish to play with, try on and submit for consideration.

Historically we've laid claim to being children of God by citing our "adoption" as a dimension of Christian baptism. We justify our claim to this anaemic version of divine parentage, citing the biblical references of our being "created in the image" of God. With the best of intentions we have both diluted and neutered our divine heritage and our potential, although I remain enlivened by the images of baptism as our ritual response to the indwelling love

of God. A re-imagining of the incarnation invites us to “re-member” (bring back into our body) the fullness of *who* and *whose* we are.

While researching my thesis I had the opportunity to talk with a young man in my congregation I’ll call Jason. Jason identifies as a gay man, formerly evangelical, now a progressive Christian in training, as well as a meth addict in recovery. His identity has been assaulted from multiple directions over his young lifetime. Central to his struggle has been the fear that God does not love him as a gay man. He has worked hard to pull his life together and finally believes that God does love him. As we talked about diversity as incarnational and universal, John’s eyes began to shine. “Oh my God” he said, “This would make all the difference. It’s one thing to think God loves me but to be literally a part of God changes everything!” I couldn’t agree more. Jason is now hungry to know more about this sacred and mystical body of which he is literally a part.

By not knowing *who* and *whose* we are, we have mistreated women, obliterated indigenous people (often in the name of religious conversion). We have excluded and marginalized gays and lesbians, racial minorities, the poor and the disenfranchised. We, the church, have let the incarnation point us further from God when, the incarnational diversity can point us closer to the divine and to one another. It was never only about Jesus, it is about all of us together. In a world plagued by deep alienation from one another and from the whole of creation, dogmas of difference must be transformed. Seeing the incarnation in the whole of humanity can help us reframe human identity and

our sacred interconnectedness with the world. By expanding our understanding of the incarnation there is at once a new vista for reconciliation, the bringing together of those who have been estranged, of as well as a new union between God and creation.

This should in no way eclipse our admiration of the Jesus for whom we are disciples. What Jesus did was model a fully covenantal and sacramental way of conducting a life, a life rooted in harmony with God—one that offers love and liberation to all people, peace where peace was absent, and hope where hopelessness had been. Jesus offered an example of the sacred fulfilment of God's creation.

By opening space for the claim that Jesus was not the sole product of incarnational birth, we make apparent the claim that all of us are the beloved and incarnate children of God. This idea is basic within the New Age movement, as well as the Transcendentalist writings of the 19th century, like those of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. Their ideas confidently assert that each of us is in-dwelted by God, and carries the divine spark of creation, a divine reality that connects and drives us as well as inspires our co-creative potential.

Martha Kirkpatrick is the Episcopal Diocese of Maine's Missioner for Environmental Stewardship. In a recent essay on the connections between earth care and incarnational theology, she extrapolates the potential of a more catholic view. She writes "my thesis is that classical incarnational theology and

its understandings of the nature and relationship between the spiritual and the material world provide an essential foundation for aligning ourselves to God and creation, as the incarnation explicates our covenantal and sacramental relationship to God and to all life."¹⁷

Spiritualist Marianne Williamson refers to our divine heritage as our innate divinity. She believes humanity is being called to support each other's greatness. She speaks of the man Jesus not as the single instance, but as one example, of what humanity can become when she writes:

"He's someone who has achieved in consciousness a state that is potential enough, but the potential isn't any greater in him. He's just a name. He is one name, actually, just one name for the actualized potential of all humanity and one of the things he (Jesus) says in the *Course of Miracles* is, 'I am not an ego-oriented teacher. I look forward to the day when you have achieved my level. Until that day, however, ask me for whatever help I can be to you.'"¹⁸

Seeing ourselves as divine family invites us to follow Jesus out of admiration and in solidarity with his radical way of being in relationship with the God of his and our creation. When parishioners ask me if I believe Jesus is the son of God my answer is "yes, but... I believe you and I are also literal sons and daughters of God as well." This is the ultimate "both/and." It is not an "either/or." I do not believe that if Jesus was not the *only* begotten then no one is. Rather, I believe we are all created by and in the image of the good, a holy, and a supernatural God.

By setting aside Jesus as the only begotten child, the newly discovered diversity of the incarnation can remind us to see God as incarnating into every

person on earth. Jesus will rightly continue to be the most sacred example of God's incarnation; an example of the best way of living one's incarnation. That said, who is my neighbor? In every real sense God is our neighbor, the God who is in you and the God who is in me.

In a survey created for this thesis project, one hundred and seventeen participants responded. Ninety two percent said they believe that the diversity found within humanity and in nature is evidence of the Creator's hand. Seventy four percent thought that seeing God in each person's face is real and not just a nice thought. Seventy eight percent thought that seeing diversity as incarnational would mean that we are in the presence of God when we are in the presence of one another. Seventy three percent thought it would mean that everyone is "neighbor" and no one is "other." (See appendix)

The heart of this logic is that because we are all created by and in the image of God, then the nature of God is diverse, and because the nature of God is diverse then diversity is not only incarnational but the way God reveals and places God's self into the temporal world. This is the heart of my belief. Taking it further, with the nature of diversity being incarnational, then it is through diversity and through one another that we embody and incarnate God and by extension, live more fully as God's children. With the nature of diversity received as incarnational, diversity becomes the source, the means and the inspiration for not only genuine community but also for the reconciliation needed for that we might truly "become" that which we are not yet.

When diversity becomes foundational to our sense of divine self, it is liberated to become a source of unity instead of division. Diversity, in all its permutations, is a sacred call with particular implications for what it can mean to be church. When seen through fresh eyes, diversity can become a developmental asset to genuine community hoped for by churches.

Hiero-Diversity

The editors of the international Catholic journal *Concilium* have tapped into a similar and even mystical vein of consciousness when, in 2007, they convened a number of dialogue partners to discuss what is now referred to as “hiero-diversity.” More inspired than concerned by with the intersections of pluralism, globalism and God’s action in the world, the editors gathered some of the best and the brightest South American theologians. Among them was Dr. Luis Carlos Susin, executive secretary of the World Forum on Theology and Liberation, Brazilian Benedictine monk Fr. Marcelo Barros, and Andres Torres Queriruga. In the journal’s introduction Susin calls for a paradigmatic leap. He considers whether the plural condition of our time is “an historical novelty or simply a fact of life that has always been but of which we now have a new understanding fraught with consequences.”¹⁹ Susin and Barros see diversity as the theological dimension of inter-cultural and inter-religious encounter. Susin is the first to name this construct as *hiero-diversity*, because of its priestly origins, thus named for its of-the-creator origin.

Diversity, because it has its origin in our Creator, goes to the deepest part of our nature. In this case I am using the term “diversity” to refer to our particularity as individuals, whether that particularity is cultural, racial or any other. Our collective particularity is our communal diversity, which now becomes a foundation tenet of what it means to be God’s people.

Incarnational diversity is indeed fraught with consequences. It has the power to become the subject and the catalyst, the noun and the verb, the reason for and the raw material of God. We are all invited [read called] to participate, to engage and to regard each member of creation as sacred. Regarding each member of God’s diverse creation as sacred begins with seeing ourselves as uniquely sacred. In the next chapter I will review the case of diversity within the Christian church, looking at how incarnational diversity has always existed and how our awareness of this fact can challenge and inspire us in the future.

"Indeed, our response to diversity must begin by recognizing it not as a problem but as a gift for the church. These diversities are a stimulus and aid to discovering more fully the inexhaustible mystery and the power of the gospel."

Christopher Duraisingh

Chapter 2

Imagining the New Church of Just Like Me

Attending church has always been an integral part of my life and that of my family. It was my experience of church people, specifically other people who attended the church of my youth that piqued my interest about the positive and negative effects of diversity. I noted that occasionally a family or an individual would leave the church, saying they were frustrated and disillusioned by their waning sense of belonging; their frustration often rooted in not being able to find a community of people who were *like them*. For these individuals "like them" took different forms, though mostly it was related to a desire of homogeneity. Homogeneity or commonness is not bad as long as we are aware of our motivations and people are not oppressed in the process. They also wanted the person in the next pew to share same, if not identical, beliefs. They wanted to be in community with others of a shared cultural background, economic class, and ethnic identity. As a result, personal pilgrimages began in search of the increasingly elusive churches of "just like me." What began in my experience as a white, middle class, multi-generational church community was becoming increasingly diverse. Looking back on it, I believe that a more

accurate appraisal would be that my congregation was becoming increasingly aware of the diversity that in many ways had always existed.

At the same time, the reasons people gather were evolving, too. Our founding American churches may have *appeared* to gather according to simple likeness, however the story, as all good stories go, is more complex. Historian E. Brooks Holifield identifies in his essay, "Toward a History of American Congregations," four distinctive patterns of congregational organization through American history: *comprehensive congregations*, 1607-1789; *devotional congregations*, 1789-1870; *social congregations*, 1870-1950; and *participatory congregations*, 1950-present. It should be noted that these are not universal patterns in the white church and certainly not descriptive of the black church. I offer them as one example of a way of looking at congregational history.

According to Holifield, ***comprehensive congregations*** understood their mission as a call to serve all people in a particular geographical community, and they were supported by the state for that very purpose. These were "town square churches" in which membership and colonial citizenship were conflated. Your entrance to such a congregation would come via your birthright.

Devotional congregations, born in the fierce religious competitiveness of a young nation, had to attract members to a denomination by providing innovative and distinctive worship practices. These churches emphasized personal and social salvation in the form of voluntary associations that they believed would bring forth God's kingdom in America.

Social congregations of the late nineteenth century returned to the ideal of comprehensiveness, but these churches could no longer embrace an entire town or city. Instead they became denominational “homes” for members in a particular area and initiated an array of programs to meet the religious and social needs of a changing society. In these churches, the parish hall became the most important sacred space on their property (churches did not have parish halls before this time; they only had sanctuaries).

Participatory congregations of the post-World War II period retained the “full-service” ideal of social congregations but, instead of depending on denomination or geography to provide members, these churches developed innovative worship and new programs as evangelism tools for recruiting new members. No longer did they simply serve the local community; rather, they created targeted programs to attract people or address particular problems. The programmatic strategies employed by these congregations tended to be market oriented—defining faith as product and congregants as religious consumers. By responding to the religious “market,” they created what Holifield calls, “cultural comprehensiveness,” deeply complex congregations that are, essentially, “a group of groups.” In essence, these decentralized churches functioned as sort of a religious shopping mall to meet the faith needs of certainty, health, prosperity, or security of religious consumers. In style (but not necessarily in their theological content) participatory congregations comfortably reflected the surrounding culture.²⁰

Historicizing the development of church communities in this way suggests that even in the churches of “like me” congregations, people in the next pew seldom if ever believed the identical same things, because belief is comprised of more than aspect. If one hundred people claim a belief in Jesus, they will likely articulate the complexity of those beliefs with surprising diversity. When my mother was alive she was fond of saying that if you put five Serbians in a room, you will have seven opinions. In other words, homogeneity was often a illusion, not a reality.

As the people and purposes of church communities changed, for those members whose vision embraced only homogeneity, it became harder to find a church where people believed the same things in the same way, and harder to find churches populated by people who looked like them and who came from identical backgrounds.

I have come to the conclusion that by thinking differently about how sameness and difference are measured, it is indeed possible to find the church of “just like me”--as long as the meaning of “like me” is expanded. The quest for a community of sameness and belonging became emblematic and problematic only because the “like me” criteria were too narrow.

It comes down to this question: what common denominators will we privilege as our reasons for gathering; what will be our method for affiliation within churches, denominations, civic organizations or, for that matter, for affiliation with the people we call friends? In my own denomination,

Metropolitan Community Churches, the gathering common denominator has morphed from the illusion of same belief expected in the churches that we were exiled from, to a community of gender nonconformity and affirmed sexual identity. Metropolitan Community Churches is a forty year old phenomenon, founded by and for gender and sexual minorities. We gathered first because we are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. We come from diverse and mostly Christian backgrounds. For the years since our founding, we have learned to make meaning out of our justice and reconciliation work as well as our common identity as sexual and gender minorities. We were known in the early years as the "gay church," known as the "AIDS church" in the 1980s and now embrace an identity of being "the human rights church." It continues to be a collective and personal evolution. We have redefined and expanded what "like us" can mean in an environment of extreme diversity and created a denomination "for us." "Like us" and "for us" is as simple as embracing our identity of all being God's children. This identity is expressed by the name of the church I serve as pastor--All God's Children Metropolitan Community Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

While on a recent excursion to the Mall of America near my home I thought of the diverse reasons people gather and make meaning together. It was there that I discovered the new, experiential, 20,000 square foot store of the American Girl doll franchise, a division of Mattel Incorporated. This enormous

retail outlet comes complete with a bistro, a hair salon, and a department carrying matching clothing for both the owners and the dolls they sell.

Since American Girl's inception in 1986, the company has devoted its resources to celebrating diversity in the stories and the potential of girls ages 3 to 12. This unusual franchise has capitalized on making space for the unique among the similar. The dolls are identical in height and general design. The same basic mold is utilized though each has been uniquely accessorized to reflect the uniqueness of the young woman who purchases an American Girl doll. For example, there is a doll in a wheelchair, a doll with Asian facial features, a Native American doll, and a doll with a broken limb that sports a fashionable cast. Their product line includes historical character dolls that connect the girls to stories set during important times in America's past. I was intrigued to learn that American Girl is primarily known for their line of "Just Like You" dolls, dolls who look like the girl who owns them. Even a casual observer will notice the near worshipful devotion to the dolls by its community of *affiliated* doll owners. The owners can be easily identified around the mall carrying their "like me" dolls wherever they go. I observed girls and parents easily beginning conversations with people they didn't know five minutes before walking into the store. There is instant affinity and common purpose. In the land of American Girl there is no "other;" there is only "us."

Few people would confuse an American Girl doll store with church, however, there are similarities. It shares certain affinity identifiers of church,

especially the churches emerging within the mainline. Some of the girls will never see the inside of an actual church, making pilgrimage instead to the American Girl mega-mart. Similar to today's emergent churches, the girls are making meaning out of their affiliation. You can say they are members of a "denomination" of girls who purposefully gather to imagine, remember, and retell their stories through play, in community with girls *just like them*. In this particular doll church, diversity is an essential means to community because though they are each owners of an American Girl Doll, the dolls match the uniqueness of their owners. As a result they have simultaneously widened and closed the "like me" gap by sharing their diversity (what makes them unique and what makes them different) alongside their shared affiliation as American Girl owners (what makes them the same). American Girl knows the meaning of "both/and."

Communities of faith can learn from how the American Girl franchise has leveraged both diversity and common denominators. The very awareness of incarnational diversity invites us to widen our affiliation criteria to rejoice in and leverage the central oneness we all share—that of being beloved children of God—along with our uniqueness. From this vista diversity trumps the *fear* of difference that leads often to divisiveness and division.

Yet the diversity that children accept so naturally tends to confound us adults. Despite excellent work being done to move us beyond tolerance to the more oft heard rhetoric of celebration and inclusion, diversity is a challenge for

significant percentages of Americans. When the Pew Research Center conducted 2,260 telephone interviews in 2008, their results pointed to the polarization that diversity can present.²¹ According to a Pew survey on religion and public life, America is conflicted on the topic of diversity. About six-in-ten Americans answered that they like the idea of living in politically, racially, religiously or economically mixed communities, while about a quarter take the opposite view—not liking diversity in any of its forms. (See figure 1) When it comes to religion specifically, some fifty nine percent say they would rather live in a community where there are many people with different religions, while twenty five percent say they would prefer to live mainly among people who are the same religion as they are. From my view, this is a phenomenon of negative “norming.”²²

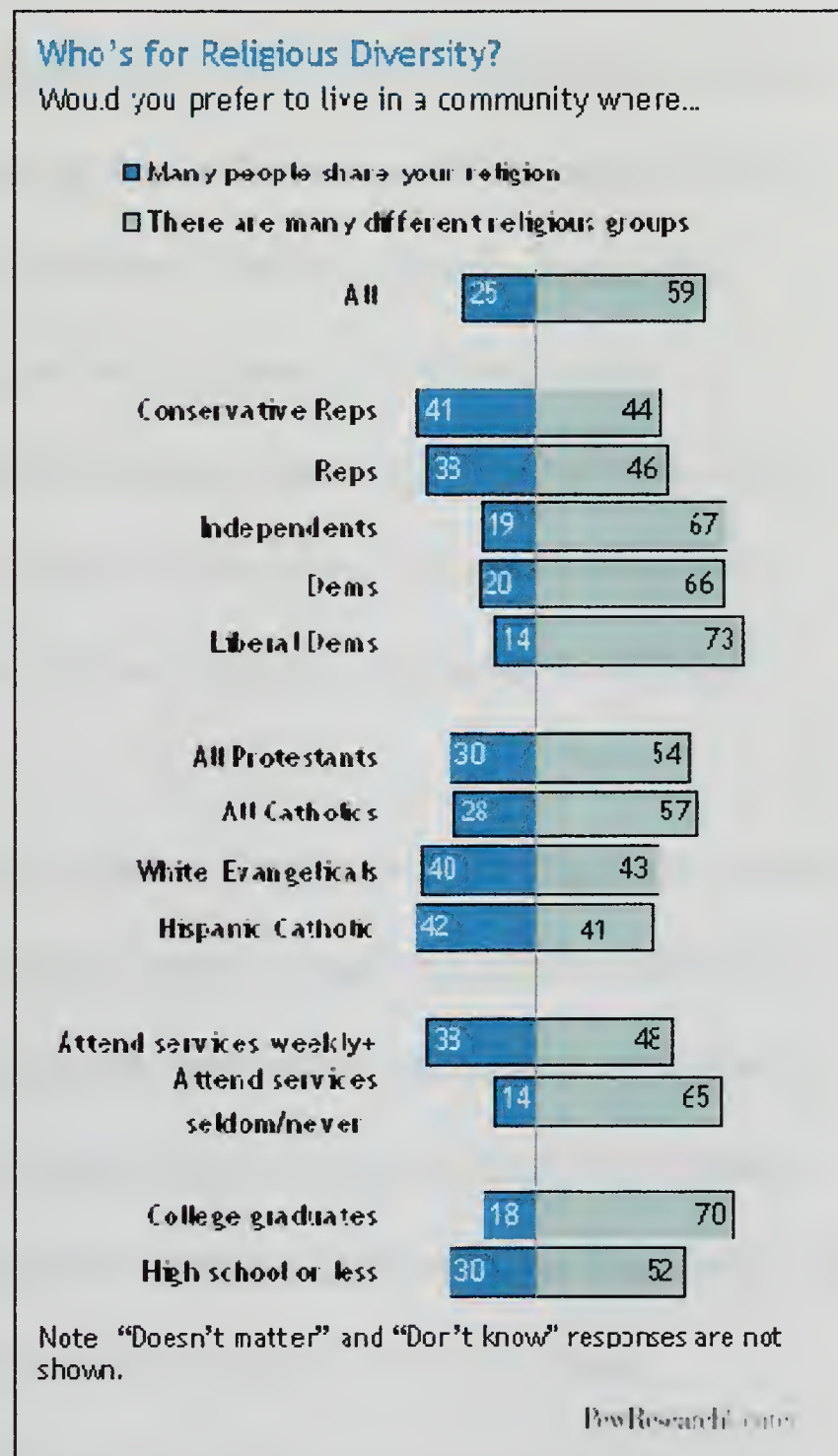
Prior to graduating from seminary, I spent several years as a professional social marketer. Social marketing utilizes a combination of marketing strategy and psychological change theory to influence public health and public safety. My agency held a grant from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention targeting the reduction of sexually transmitted diseases among young adults. During the formative research that precedes a social marketing campaign, focus groups were held and surveys conducted. We learned that young people believed *all their friends* were sexually active. This was their perceived normal even though the survey data told us that there are far fewer sexually active teens than previously believed. The resulting campaign was then designed to

influence behavior based on an accurate *normal*. Such a process is called “norming.” I offer this as an example of what may be going on when people are polled on the topic of diversity. If one believes diversity normally leads to division, they will say that they do not like diversity. The opposite is also true. If one believes diversity is a good thing, survey results will be more positive. This thesis is offered to *norm* how the church views diversity, shifting us from a divisive narrative to one of new possibility.

This has particular implications for congregational life, church growth and our review of church history as we come to new understanding for what has always been. It is simply not accurate to conclude that the church has only gathered based on likeness and

similarity. Diversity has always existed. To that end I invite us to look again.

Where I live, for example, many of the early immigrants to Minnesota were primarily German or Scandinavian, and largely Lutheran or Catholic. In general



the Danes immigrated and founded churches together, as did the Norwegians, the Swedes, the Fins and the Germans. This constituted one important common denominator (country of origin); however, it was not the complete story. Country of origin was a single criterion for affiliation, though it did not guarantee homogeneity or even consensus of belief. Later, partly due to clergy availability, congregations began to more consciously expand their understanding, as well as their purposes for and locations of gathering. These may have been the original pioneers of what today's progressive Christian movement calls "intentional" communities. They represented a genesis of gathering based only in part on country of origin, language spoken, then later for location, purpose and mission. Diversity has always been with us. It is our awareness of diversity that has shifted over time.

It is also true that global mobility as well as the information age has played a part in expanding our awareness. Diversity once named as a minor presence is now a prevalent, nearly-unavoidable reality. My personal experience coming from an immigrant family and living in an immigrant neighborhood was more of an exception in the 1950s. Today we live in a global neighborhood, the reality of which is present within our churches. Since the Vietnam War most new immigrants to the U.S., and MN in particular, have been Southeast Asian, East African, and Mexican—many of them illiterate or semiliterate, from agrarian economies instead of industrial ones, and practicing beliefs vastly different

from—even incongruous to—Christianity. All are welcome and all are celebrated through a lens of incarnational diversity.

Grieving the homogeneity of the past must give way to celebrating a new value for and experience of the diversity of today. I recently traveled back to California to visit the church where I was first confirmed. In the 1950's the congregation was mostly white and of European descent. When I returned in 2009 I noted that the diversity was more obvious. The all-white congregation has aged but they're still there. The newer members represent different ages and political affiliations. The church is racially mixed, with the leadership model being a co-pastorate shared by a white male and an African American male. They once gathered largely as white Methodists living in Napa, California, but today they are thrilled to be seen as a diverse community. They have expanded their criterion for gathering to include the justice work they do together in Christian community. Mainline denominational and cultural identity has been replaced with identities based on communal practice.

Researcher Diana Butler Bass calls communities like First Methodist in Napa *practicing* congregations. Often these are congregations with significant history, congregations that have re-invented themselves to be more relevant to the needs and realities of today's Christian churchgoer. Practicing congregations have evolved their reasons for being together.

"They weave Christian practices—activities drawn from the long Christian tradition—into a pattern of being church that forms an intentional way of life in community. They have "re-traditioned" their faith to retain and to reform what was. They are part of a trend whereby religious communities

focus on meaning-making by gathering up the past and re-presenting it through both story and action in ways that help people connect with God, one another, and the world outside the doors of church buildings.”²³

Butler Bass is senior research fellow and director of the Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice, a Lilly Endowment funded research study at Virginia Theological Seminary of vital mainline Protestant Churches. The project identified fifty diverse U.S. congregations that have experienced renewed senses of identity, vocation, and mission through intentionally embracing particular Christian practices that, in special ways, embodied a way of life that made sense of the Gospel in their unique cultural contexts. Of the twenty three key Christian practices that these fifty congregations named as vital, the top three were: reflection, embracing diversity, and hospitality.²⁴

At issue when the project began were what she described as “tired story lines about diversity and conflict, about liberal and conservative divides, and about mainline decline.” Butler Bass’ concern was that “contemporary mainline Protestants have believed these stories, allowing their self-understanding to be colonized by storytellers outside their tradition whose work is sometimes driven by agendas that benefit from stories of conflict and decline.”²⁵ For those people who believed the darker narratives and have left churches in frustration, I cannot overestimate the power of being colonized by inaccurate stories.

Butler Bass tells us that there are Protestant pastors who look at diversity as a problem, bemoaning the decline of denominational identity and the rise of what they perceive to be theological chaos, the absence of dogmatic

certainties. Steve Jacobsen, pastor of Goleta Presbyterian in California, is not one of them. As a native Californian, he has been shaped by the ideal and practice of diversity. He believes that today's church is now a church of rich diversity. Jacobsen thinks that communal variety is a source of "complex wisdom," a quality that Christians should value. He estimates that three-quarters of the members of his church did not grow up Presbyterian. Like the pastor himself, many were born into other traditions. And some were brought up with no religion at all. "For centuries congregations were formed around ethnic identities," Jacobsen writes, "People shared a native language, customs, and well-defined theology. But all that has changed."²⁶

Living in a world punctuated by extreme social change, multiculturalism, ethnic and theological diversity, people have walked away from the churches of their parents, giving up on both the institution and the experience *prematurely*. If it is someone's belief that people within a church should look the same and think the same as he or she does, difference could divide the believer from the community, and he or she may give up on church all together. In that view, today's pluralism and multiculturalism would be cause for despair. Yet I argue such an exodus is *premature*, because historically churches have always been places of difference, tension, and as a result opportunity.

According to Butler Bass, in times of conflict and dissatisfaction, people tend to blame something inside denominational structures, or they blame

someone inside the church, for the tensions, pressures, and stresses associated with change in American churches.²⁷

Many changes, conflicts, and tensions do not arise from factors within religious communities themselves. Rather these are the result of institutions reacting and responding to larger cultural changes—trends, ideas, and practices outside the church building. People bring their fears about the large-scale social change with them to church. These cultural anxieties are often the hidden source of congregational conflict. Congregants overfocus on what is at hand and forget the stress and anxiety of global cultural changes that are affecting nearly every human being on the planet at this juncture of history.²⁸

Sadly, people have often fuelled the cycle of conflict and despair, content to believe the narratives they've been fed and unable or unwilling to imagine new narratives and different outcomes. An example of this would be the schism within the Evangelical Lutheran Church around the topic of gay and lesbian clergy. Tied to a more orthodox worldview of the Bible, church members struggle in earnest around this issue. It is much easier to weather the conflict and find the means to reconciliation when we see the face of God in the face of those we believe we are in disagreement with. Seeing the diversity around us as incarnational opens a sacred space for reconciliation and genuine hoped-for community. It is from this vantage that we can begin to write new narratives for our communities.

Goleta Presbyterian is just one congregation that is writing a new narrative. Jeannie, the church secretary and a long-time member, says "This (Goleta Presbyterian) is a church full of difference but not a lot of division."²⁹

Goleta's pastor has a name for their congregational diversity. Pastor Steve calls it "a polyculture of the Spirit—different ways of being Christian, each with an inherent integrity and vitality." Unlike those who think that diversity sounds like a death knell for Christianity, Steve says confidently, "When we create programs, study groups, and worship services, we intentionally seek to reflect the diversity we have in our midst."³⁰

The Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice, a project funded by the Lilly Endowment and located at Virginia Theological Seminary, revealed a string of new narratives and practices convincing its staff that mainline churches can be envisioned more imaginatively by providing a different set of categories through which church leaders and congregants can understand their experiences, foster their hopes, and recognize the gift of diversity among their communities.

Incarnational diversity could be such a category. The American church story is one of immigrant hope, evolving tradition, with shifting and growing, not declining, impact. But in order for Incarnation Diversity to be a tenable tenet of spiritual hope, it is important that American churches deal honestly with our history and practice of colonizing others. Christopher Duraisingh³¹ reminds us that we have long felt it incumbent upon those who possess the good news to share that news with others. Instead of sharing the good news by gracious invitation, colonialism became the purposeful cleansing, conquering or assimilating of other cultures and diverse people groups. He names it clearly

when he writes, “The colonial and Euro-centric definitions of other cultures and traditions arise out of the same philosophical mind-set where “the other,” that which is “strange” is to be conquered, or suppressed, converted and civilized.”³²

The truth is, we are all strange if the standard is our own particularity; we are all other to someone else. The part of our Christian story that needs retelling relates to the criteria of our greater identity, the stories of who gathered, where, for what purposes and for what hope. By reviewing the history of what drew us together in the past we are free to explore what might invite us into communities of faith in the future. Diversity need not become or remain a block of stumbling in our faith. The growing diversity experienced in the world and in the church is something we are just learning to name, navigate, celebrate and...incarnate.

In a survey titled “Incarnational Diversity,” created for this thesis project, sixty seven percent of the one hundred seventeen respondents admitted to “sometimes being uncomfortable in the presence of difference.” They defined difference in the following ways: Twenty eight percent thought of it as differences from their own cultural background or ethnicity; twelve percent thought of it as differences in viewpoint from their own; twenty four percent saw it as referring to differences in religious belief or practice; twenty percent see it as referring to differences of sexual orientation; fifteen percent as differences in economic class or political affiliation, with seventy eight percent thinking of diversity as reflective of all previously stated categories.

When survey respondents were asked if they thought people generally look for churches where the people attending are similar to themselves and where they either believe the same things or come from similar backgrounds, sixty six percent responded “yes.” Only twenty two percent answered that they believed that *used* to be very common but think it is less so today. Sixty two percent had left at least one church, job or organization because people had ideas, beliefs and practices that were different from their own.

Butler Bass describes today’s church landscape by saying, “At this point, American congregational life is like a mosaic. The large picture of intentionality can be discerned by standing back; the multiplicity of forms of the individual pieces is both beautiful in creativity and confusing up close! This mosaic of change is becoming an increasingly obvious phenomenon; however, it is only just substantial enough to be discerned and to be given shape through language and narrative.”³³

In the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC) of which I am the pastor, forty five percent of the congregation comes from Catholic backgrounds, forty percent from Lutheran backgrounds, and fifteen percent from faith traditions other than Catholic or Lutheran. We are drawn together as a human rights community, most of us being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered (LGBT). We gather for worship, community and common purpose; largely social justice work related to LGBT equality. Metropolitan Community Churches are not heritage churches of memory or practice. Aunt Mary didn’t attend and

generations have not been baptized there. We are a forty year old denomination, originally formed in exile from the heritage churches that excluded us because of our sexual orientation or gender identity. Diversity within Metropolitan Community Churches, whether expressed by class, race, gender, political affiliation, culture, or theological belief is the norm, not the exception. We are clear that the differences that once divided us and certainly excluded us from previous communities, are now a source of unity. MCC celebrates all diversity as reflected in our mission statement: "We celebrate our many backgrounds in worship, music, education, ministries, leadership and membership, appreciating and nurturing the gifts each offers to the whole."³⁴

Throughout history, Christian communities have gathered as much for purpose and pattern as for people. Contemporary intentional communities have before them the need to make agreements about what it is they intend to create in their worship environment, their spiritual practice, and their role in the world. Today's practicing congregations have learned that congregants need not agree on every issue but they do need to learn to make agreements; agreements that forge mission and identify priorities.

One of the congregations featured in the Project on Congregations of Intentional Practice is Epiphany Episcopal Church in Washington D.C. According to Diana Butler Bass,

Church of the Epiphany, Washington, D.C. founded as a city mission in 1842. 150 years later not many people remained in the decaying old urban building and a dwindling endowment paid the bills. There was talk of closing it down or combining it with another parish. 10 years later at the

church's 160th anniversary, no one even whispered of closing Epiphany. Epiphany bustles with new vitality. During the week, the church offers concerts, daily Eucharist, labyrinth walks, and adult spirituality courses for downtown workers. On Sundays, the 8:00 AM worship service welcomes two hundred homeless guests to both Eucharist and breakfast. The more traditional 11:00 AM service no longer comprises Washington's political elite and genteel aristocrats. Gone are the white gloved acolytes and massive paid choir. Rather, a congregation of incredible diversity with multiple races, ethnicities, classes, generations, and sexual orientations now inhabits its pews.³⁵

Despite all the changes, Epiphany remained faithful to its mainline heritage, remembering the reasons for its founding as well as its successes over the years.

Its people speak the languages of social justice, inclusion, women's rights, ecumenism, and interreligious dialogue. The privatized piety of old-style Protestant liberalism has been supplanted by a new sense of spiritual vitality and expressive faith. They practice healing prayer, hospitality, silence, discernment, stewardship, and peace-making; they attend retreats, quiet days, spirituality workshops and Bible studies. These practices happen purposefully, intentionally chosen by a new generation of church goers who share and teach them in community. Down the long hard slide from the pinnacle of establishment, prominence, Epiphany has discovered that cultural marginalization, peeling paint, urban funkiness; global diversity, homeless congregants, and healing prayer are gifts from a generous God.³⁶

Epiphany Episcopal has evolved theologically and spiritually. They have undergone a transformation in content, practice, and worldview. Explicitly or implicitly, Epiphany has begun to identify as a community of diversity—diverse backgrounds, diverse cultures, diverse gifts, diverse beliefs—and this is what they privilege and celebrate. What they have in common is that they understand themselves to be gathering with people just like them, people whose faith lives revolve around *who* and *whose* they are.

Epiphany and congregations like them are becoming fluent in the language of diversity even though they may not have been introduced to the language of hiero and incarnational diversity. They are energized by the difference that makes up their community, drawn together by their holistic way of seeing the sacred in each other. As such incarnational diversity can provide language and purpose for what has always been happening in congregational life. God has always been present in the divine spark of the individual and collectively present in community. Seeing God's presence through this lens can become the growing edge of the intentional community of the future; the growing edge of genuine community.

Adding to this growing edge of community and possibility is another emerging reality affecting the church culture in the U.S. "The authority that once rested solely in the church now rests in us as individuals. We have switched from a univocal culture (a relatively unified set of external authorities) to being a multivocal ("of many voices") religious society in which the individual is the final arbiter of truth. Both personal autonomy and multiculturalism have hastened the demise of what was the Caucasian Protestant-Catholic-Jew religious establishment of the past."³⁷ This is good news because it has a distinct upside. "Individual autonomy means that we are stepping up to take spiritual, moral, and ethical responsibility for ourselves. This is giving us a higher stake in our choices. The emerging church of today is individual, deeply pluralistic, preferring no faith, whether a majority or minority one, over another. America

has a multivocal religious culture with more and more congregations becoming cross-cultural communities of choice, conscience and intentionality.”³⁸

The phenomenon of which I speak is not limited to the United States. In an article titled, “Contextual and Catholic: Conditions for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics,” Christopher Duraisingh writes: “These developments in almost all Christian world communions point also to the enormous potential within the churches to be credible signs and instruments of a reconciled human community that God intends for all humans across all cultural, racial and ethnic divides.”³⁹

Indeed, our response to diversity must begin by recognizing it not as a problem but as a gift for the church. These diversities are a stimulus and aid to discovering more fully the inexhaustible mystery and the power of the gospel. As the church explores them, it discerns the richness of the gospel more profoundly and learns to respond better to its implication for all life. Specific churches may be helped to see their own need for further transformation as they recognize their own responses to the gospel have suppressed some of its transforming elements. (Also) the church needs diversity. We need each other especially when we are different from each other. Diversity within and among local churches protects them from their blind spots, broadens their vision and deepens their awareness of God’s reconciling work throughout the cosmos.⁴⁰

Diversity is not new. It has been present from the beginning of the church. As Christ’s word spread and took root in villages, communities, and countries, each person and group brought something new, something incarnational, to the table. Today’s pluralism circles us back to our root beginnings, calling us to a freshness of spirit for those unafraid of answering the voice. It is through this hermeneutical lens that we experience something new about God. It is through

our differences that the realm of God breaks in and goes forth. Incarnational diversity can offer a revitalized vision for why we are here, what God is about in the world and how God can work in, with and through humanity. Indeed, we are being called, finally, to gather according to God's likeness, the likeness that unites us all.

"We are living in a period of transition, as always."
Ennio Flavio

Chapter 3

Waging Reconciliation through *Hiero-Diversity*

Why is it that in two thousand years of recorded history, we still can't get along with each other? This was a question my mother asked often. She could never quite square in her own mind or spirit the idea that humanity could wage war more easily than it could wage peace. When her own mother and three aunts were held in the concentration camps that preceded World War 1, she grieved not only for the members of her own family who perished, but also in realizing that some men could deem themselves so superior as to believe others were expendable. Our response to one another throughout human history has been less than incarnational, meaning that we have made our actions in the world more often about self-interest, and seldom about interconnectedness we share with God and each other. As a result, we have left a wide path of destruction in the wake of an elevated sense of self. We have justified a predisposition to war and oppression as "survival of the fittest," or simply the collateral damage of a free market economy. The question I ask is whether we human beings are more naturally predisposed to waging war, or to standing with one another in peace and possibility.

The goals for this chapter are simple; 1) To open a conversation regarding new possibilities for our world as seen from the perspective of *hiero-diversity*, 2)

To inspire the leveraging of our collective sacred identity towards reconciliation, and 3) To suggest that the church step forward as leaders in this effort going forward. In this chapter I use “diversity” as an umbrella term that encompasses the separate terms of *pluralism* (diversities of thought, religion, identity, or values within a society), *difference* (anything that differentiates, particularizes, or sets people apart) and *multiculturalism* (the differentiation of cultural origin and tradition). I use *diversity* to identify “God’s rich variety.” I will continue to point us to the perfectly timed truth that diversity has been purposefully built into creation for communion, not clash. The goals are simple; the work will be challenging.

The First World has an especially long history of imposing its values and its religious worldview onto the lives and bodies of others. Christian missionaries have “civilized” indigenous peoples from the Philippines to the plains of the United States by condemning their spiritual practices, institutionalizing their children, and criminalizing their language. Ivone Gebara writes, “Human groups resist recognizing this reality and tend to absolutize their own truths, attempting to impose them as supreme verities.”⁴¹ The absolutizing of our own truths has led to a misguided superiority complex whereby some have concluded that the ends justified the means. In reality, neither the ends (salvation through Jesus at any cost) nor the means are justified. Gebara further reminds us that “We still have not managed to break away from our anthropocentrism, our androcentrism, and above all, our exaggerated

fascination with consumerism. This attitude, has in a certain sense, become our body, our psyche, and our way of organizing in the world.⁴² Capitalism—and before that, imperialism—have valued profit and economic power more than human beings' divinity. Incarnational diversity, as our new context, can serve as an antidote, as a starting place whereby we can try on new ways of being together in global community. But as nice an ideal as global community is, it won't happen simply because we believe it or hope it. We will need to put our backs into it, spending more time and effort caring for people by solving practical problems like hunger, family violence, and drug addiction and less time having raffles at church suppers.

During the years I worked in marketing, a popular story was often told in leadership seminars to illustrate the difference between leaders and managers: According to the tale, a group of workers are busily cutting through a jungle, each taking care of the particular task assigned to him or her by the managers, who monitor the workers' progress. Meanwhile, the leader has climbed to the top of the tallest tree, giving her a 360 degree view of the entire worksite and beyond. After a careful survey the leader yells down, "Wrong jungle! Everybody move!" This simple story reminds us that the work at hand needs to be the right work. Being busy has nothing to do necessarily with being engaged in the right job.

Leadership, not management, is needed today. The crisis we find ourselves in requires an *incarnational* strategy; a strategy that puts people before profits,

and seeks reconciliation and restoration for the damage we've already caused. As we enter the most complex time in human history, visionary leadership is critical. First World society is waking up to the inconvenient truth that we have separated ourselves from nature and neighbor, and we are beyond *managing* the situation. We need the kind of leadership that will speak truth to power, knowing when to yell out "Wrong jungle!" We continue to face the harmful effects of now globalized industrial and capitalist exploitation, held in juxtaposition with the more positive opportunities of globalization. And yet, not unlike the Roman Empire that collapsed in on itself because of their need for domination, the First World is collapsing in on itself because of unchecked greed. Given the extreme risk to human rights and the environment global capitalism poses, the church could be in a unique leadership position going forward. To the extent that greed will likely always exist, leadership is needed to ensure that capitalism doesn't succeed over the backs of the poor.

Ian Douglas puts globalization into context when he writes, "At issue are competing realities. Globalization has led to more than 1.5 trillion United States dollars being exchanged each day in the world's currency markets."⁴³

Paradoxically this has meant the spread of both wealth and opportunity for the "haves" along with the oppression and exile of the "have nots." Add to this our significant racial, cultural, ethnic and religious divide and we find ourselves grappling for understanding, as well as for effective ways of dealing with, our growing awareness of global human diversity. An important difference

between management and leadership is that management's focus is to *deal with* diversity as an obstacle or challenge. Leadership would leverage diversity toward growth, and view globalization as a mechanism for progress. We need leadership in order to creatively respond to their awareness in helpful, appropriate ways.

The late Samuel Huntington, a Harvard economics professor, believed diversity portends a certain formula for division when he wrote "World politics is entering a new phase, in which the great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of international conflict will be cultural."⁴⁴ Because of impending cultural conflict "the United States must forge alliances with similar cultures and spread its values wherever possible. With alien civilizations the West must be accommodating if possible, but confrontational if necessary. In the final analysis, however, all civilizations will have to learn to tolerate each other."⁴⁵ Tolerating each other is an impotent response to global community. The incarnational response is to celebrate, stand with, educate, and support each other.

I argue against what Samuel Huntington feared—that diversity could only result in a "clash of civilizations." Rather, diversity is the antidote to and not the locus of the problem. With God's diverse design seen as incarnational and embodied, the church's leadership becomes an essential component. What we need is the social gospel of our past, reinvented for such a time as this. The church is uniquely qualified for and called to leadership in this arena partly

because the origin of globalization has its roots in the global spread of Christianity: the church itself expanded across Asia, the Mediterranean, and Southern Italy in its early development.

As a direct result the church has a built-in (though currently disorganized) infrastructure to address and impact humanity, making globalization a potential mechanism *for* change, not just a phenomenon of change. The church is called to raise consciousness, to educate and demonstrate that God's greatest imagination involves human flourishing. Incarnational diversity is our newest hermeneutic through which we can shape the mission, vision and values of the church, not to make the world Christian, but to convene multi-faith leadership. Without our leadership we will continue to accept increasing amounts of human and ecological damage. The church needs to step up and we need to walk our convictions out into the world.

By placing my own passionate hunch in conversation with voices such as Dr. Luis Carlos Susin, Samuel Huntington, Christopher Duraisingh, Fr. Marcelo Barros and the Reverend Leng Lim, I hope to reorient a discussion that too often results in a hermeneutic of suspicion toward a hermeneutic that treasures (rather than fears) diversity, lifting it high for the entire world to see. Could we suspend our fears of clash while trying on this new way of seeing and being in the world? Questions like this can point us towards critical mass consciousness, a harmonic convergence of global voices beginning to language diversity as the evidence of an in-breaking of God—not the opposite. Diversity may just be God's

antidote to the fear of clash, achieved because humanity awakens to a new dream that something else is possible.

Dr. Luis Carlos Susin, executive secretary of the World Forum on Theology and Liberation, calls for what he terms “a paradigmatic leap.” He asks, is the plural condition of our time “a historical novelty or simply a fact of life that has always been but of which we now have a new understanding fraught with consequences?”⁴⁶ The plural condition of our time is more than a historical novelty or a fact of life. It is part of God’s on-purpose design strategy, potentially fraught with wonderful consequences. Susin offers an example of the re-imagined teaching beginning to come from the church. He is also an example of a visionary leader with a “tree top” vantage. He writes, “The increasingly obvious emergence of pluralism, to the point where it marks a new paradigm, compels a new and more forceful approach to it, seeking new insights and trying out a new language.”⁴⁷ What Susin imagines is nothing short of a new awakening, “an awakening from the *dogmatic religious dream*, and a ‘new enlightenment’, of religious stamp, based on otherness and plurality, instead of on subjectivity and an identity with claims to exclusive universality and absolute uniqueness.”⁴⁸

What I hear him suggesting is that we’ve been stuck in a revelation of exclusivity and false superiority. Can we open ourselves to the possibility that we connected the dots without having all the dots available to connect? Such a paradigmatic leap will require a bold acceptance of an epistemological

change, with all that that implies, and which is taking place, irrevocably, in our time. This is sound leadership.

Fr. Marcelo Barros echoes similar belief. In his essay, "Dwellings of the Wind on Human Paths: Toward a Theology of Hiero-diversity," he writes "The face of today's world is coming to be a plurality of pluralisms. This is not an inevitable evil with which we are forced to live. On the contrary, it is a divine grace containing a sort of new divine revelation."⁴⁹ When it comes to the pluralism around us, we've been so busy trying to figure out how to deal with it that we've missed the invitation to ask what it may be showing us! Revelation becomes evident when we are open to noticing when it becomes evident. We'll never notice what we're not looking for. For example, our Christian leadership could include convening leaders from all the world's major religions.

I have long believed that diversity, in all its forms, constitutes the mystical infrastructure by which we engage God's mission—an engagement, a *communion within* global community, not in spite of it. When we pay attention we will notice that the co-creative presence of "other" can point us to ways God is working in, with, through and on behalf of creation. Through this hermeneutic lens, diversity is holy, incarnational and an essential part of God's design—a divine grace! In no way is diversity a cumulative or negative *accident*, nor is it a historical novelty. Borrowing from the language of the business world, diversity is God's "D.B.A.," (*doing business as*). God is doing business through multiculturalism, pluralism, differences in class, race, and

gender. It is this D.B.A. which offers us a sort of "D.N.A." Diversity is naturally occurring and is an asset of intentional design.

It is curious that diversity is for many a source of fear and worse yet, evidence of crisis. This may be the result of seeing it as a historical novelty or a problematic fact of life. It is a dangerous distraction to conclude that unprecedented multiculturalism, pluralism, and competing world economies are the locus of our future demise. Diversity is not the root of the problem; rather it is the root of an essential solution, that of our divine connection. Divine connection can provide a bridge to the re-negotiations that will be necessary to navigate the world's realities. Without this lens, we find ourselves knee deep in a river, dying of thirst. I submit that we have not spun off the intended axis of God's imagination, we are on the verge of discovering it. As with all opportunities for change, this will begin with awareness and interest, proceeding to information seeking, dialogue, and finally action. These are the basic steps of "change theory," the processes by which people receive and internalize information leading to change for public and self good.

We are being called to "amp up" the dialogue, elevating it from "so-what" reflections to embodied, "yes" incarnational action. Again it is the church that is positioned to provide both insight and leadership. We cannot remain silent partners with God; we need to get co-creative and fast. Barely two weeks after September 11, 2001 the Bishops of the Episcopal Church met for a scheduled meeting, the subject of which happened to be "God's Mission in a

Global Communion of Difference." The Reverend Leng Lim was one of several presenters at that meeting. With images of the twin towers still fresh in their minds, Reverend Lim reminded his unique audience that the world's economists were not capable of or interested in dealing with the existential nature of life. He invited the Bishops to cross disciplines and become schooled in economics. Lim told them that although his presentation was ostensibly about economics, it was more about leadership and the singular importance of what he terms "moral imagination." What he envisions is an entirely new "*oikonomia*" (household economy):

"[Needed is] a new ecumenism and a new economy for the common household of our collective humanity. This oikonomia must not only generate wealth, it must alleviate poverty; it must not only honor the ambitions of the able, but the hopes of the marginal; it must not only give us a common economic or political framework, but must honor the diversities of cultures; it must not only forward our own Western self-interest, it must also honor the hopes and humbleness of others.⁵⁰"

For this imagined *oikonomia* to become reality, the church must engage the world with new forms of moral leadership, getting out of God's way as it were. Created in God's image, our collective humanity is a divine clue to our interconnectedness. How could it be otherwise? If this is our belief then it requires that we take stock of the price and the collateral damage of globalism. We have shamefully conducted our business of greed ignoring the world's need and in many cases making it worse.

"The world has not yet been willing to bear one another's burdens across the divides of culture, religion, and differing views of the world. The

affluence of nations such as our own stands in stark contrast to other parts of the world wracked by crushing poverty, which causes the death of 6,000 children in the course of a morning. We are called to self-examination and repentance: the willingness to change direction, to open our hearts and give room to God's compassion as it seeks to bind up, to heal, and to make all things new and whole."⁵¹

Bearing one another's burdens by ending and never causing oppression, marginalization and the suppression of opportunities for the vulnerable are our Christian work—our “right jungle.” It is the work we participate in by virtue of our baptism. In truth, as Teresa of Avila professed, “Christ has no body now on earth but yours, no hands but yours, no feet but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ's compassion is to look out to the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ is to go about doing good. Yours are the hands with which Christ is to bless all people now.”

Harvard University is now talking about creating a new curriculum whereby all students are taught to cross disciplines in order to learn about religion. In a provocative article in the February 22, 2010, issue of *Newsweek* magazine, writer Lisa Miller believes the importance of religious education goes without saying. She notes, “The conflicts between the Israelis and the Palestinians; between Christians, Muslims, and animists in Africa; between religious conservatives and progressives at home over abortion and gay marriage—all these relate, if indirectly, to what rival groups believe about God and scripture. Any resolution of these conflicts will have to come from people who understand how religious belief and practice influence our world: why in particular, believers see some things as worth fighting and dying for.” This is

another example of why the church's leadership is so important. It is also important to note that when it comes to economics, the wealth creation of a free market economy is not intrinsically bad. Re-imagined, the globalized nature of our economy could produce jobs, positively affecting poverty, as well as educate indigenous people in sustainable and appropriate ways. It will not be easy to engage a free market economy in a way that liberates and never oppresses. Hierarchical diversity can become the root of a guiding ethic, helping us eclipse the anxieties of difference by learning to see the face of God in both neighbor and self and conducting our business accordingly.

Globalization as a mechanism can become simultaneously the raw methodology of both productivity and human becoming. Luis Carlos Susin believes globalization "can bring positive values, such as encouragement of democracy and human rights," however until this belief is realized, "divisive market-based globalization is creating a new, globalized form of *apartheid*, threatening the future of the poor masses and that of all forms of life on earth."⁵² Before we can embrace the positive opportunities of globalization, we need to identify all available assets and pack our bags for travel to this new jungle. The ideology that posits diversity as only a source of current and future division is an evil distraction of momentous proportion.

Along the way we will have to keep checking our fear, reminding ourselves that diversity is not new. Harvard University professor of economics, Richard Parker, was a guest lecturer at EDS when he told us "From the moment

the first cave man left the cave, his identity shifted to be informed by everything and everyone outside the culture of that first cave."⁵³ Diversity in any of its forms is a complex tapestry, not easily kept in isolation. Sir Edward Burnett Tylor's definition sees culture as "a complex whole that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, morality, laws, customs, and other capacities a human being acquires as a member of a society."⁵⁴ Marcelo Barros applies this definition explaining that when culture is expressed through religion or spirituality, it refers to the relationship between human beings and the ultimate mystery that is God. Barros notes that "globalization and increasingly wicked international politics aggravates poverty and contributes to making cultural and religious pluralism take new forms that require more up-to-date interpretations."⁵⁵ These up-to-date interpretations will require the church's involvement.

The attitude that the United States should be anxiously engaged in pollinating the world with our largely male, white, European values is one reason we find ourselves in such polarized divide. Barros refers to Huntington's conclusions as pessimistic theory which is ultimately ethnocentric and colonialist. It was Huntington's hypothesis that: "The fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among humankind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of

different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future."⁵⁶

Huntington's viewpoint concluded that cultural diversity came without permeable borders, and that because societies could not redesignate their history and context, the only outcome was conflict: "First, differences among civilizations are not only real; they are basic. Civilizations are differentiated from each other by history, language, culture, tradition and, most important, religion. The people of different civilizations have different views on the relations between God and man, the individual and the group, the citizen and the state, parents and children, husband and wife, as well as differing views of the relative importance of rights and responsibilities, liberty and authority, equality and hierarchy. These differences are the product of centuries. They will not soon disappear."⁵⁷

Are divisions due to difference certain? Is this a zero sum game? I do not suggest that societies come together as in the melting pot analogy. Melting pot diversity makes a stew out of God's rich variety when our beauty lies in our particularities. "Stew" blends its ingredients all together into a sludge. I submit that it is possible, even critical that we learn to celebrate the unique within the fusion, seeing the face of God reflected in our neighbor. This is not a form of reductionism, not an attempt to oversimplify complex realities; rather it is a process of encounter based on our common identity as children of God. This is our shared and fully human, fully divine heritage. The church must show

leadership by demonstrating the “reordering and transforming of our common life so they may reveal God’s justness—not as an abstraction—but in bread for the hungry.”⁵⁸

The embrace of incarnational diversity invites us to re-imagine it as the means to moving us beyond ourselves. Diversity is given out of love for the human race, but to be fully transformed by diversity, we will need permeable borders: national, geographic, spiritual, and ethical. Diversity—ideological, racial, cultural, or any other form-- is best seen as God in our midst. As such it *should* get our attention and demand our action. This is what Lim meant when he called for a new moral imagination. We are standing in our own way unless we begin to tell our stories differently going forward.

Again, a reorientation is required. Every new strategic plan begins first with an assessment. There are critical, even basic, questions that need answering. Are we Christians off course or are we divinely on course? Is this where the disciples imagined we’d be two thousand years after they first agreed to go to Greece? Where do we want to be if *this* isn’t it? What then is the church’s role going forward? With diversity as incarnational we are both divinely off course and on course. New revelation can point us toward a mid-course correction. The disciples would likely be honored and horrified with where we’ve landed two thousand years after Paul left the first enclaves of Christianity in Jerusalem. They would be honoured that Christianity has spread the whole world over and they would be horrified at what cost. The difference in seeing ourselves as both

off course and on course is that we have new clues and new language to begin the journey. Our goal should be living in a world populated by the promise of global community, a new "oikonomia," a new "ecclesia," each providing the generation of growth, prosperity and opportunity for all. Diversity is not an accident and it is not unnatural, but in fact the opposite is true. There is evidence according to the natural sciences that diversity is ultimately evidence of a healthy environment, the subject of the next chapter.

"Religions have an undeniable social role in helping us to develop the sensitivities we need in order to love the earth and the human community in the light of the indissoluble communion among all beings."
Ivone Gebara

Chapter 4

She's got The Whole "Web" in Her Hands

When William Kondrath published his recent book *"God's Tapestry: Understanding and Celebrating Difference,"* I was fortunate to speak with him about my own thesis project. I asked him if there was anything he hadn't covered about the topic of diversity and his answer opened up an entirely new landscape. He suggested I look to what scientists are saying about the diversity present in the natural world. He reminded me that within science, the presence of diversity is always interpreted as a positive, a sign of health and strength. Science, not religion, is making a case for diversity in ways that prove it is naturally occurring and not an accident.

According to Francis S. Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, "Scientists are constantly reaching into new arenas, investigating the natural world in new ways, digging deeper into territory where understanding is incomplete."⁵⁹ Even though he reports that many cutting edge experiments fail, he prompts us to see that science has by definition been "progressive and self-correcting, always searching for new discovery."⁶⁰ In contrast, the church has at times in its history attached itself to ideas, and been unwilling to investigate or renegotiate things previously canonized as right belief. The church has been

guarded as if against or afraid of new discovery. Thus the theology of hiero-diversity has better champions, at times, in the realm of science than in the church. Science is becoming an unlikely partner in hiero-diversity by providing new evidence for ideas that people of faith have long held to be true, including ideas related to the origins of the universe, the existence of God, the sacredness of Creation, and now, the essentiality of diversity. In the case of diversity, science is helping open new vistas in nature that have corollaries in religion, specifically in the God-world relationship. In the case of diversity, science is taking the lead.

Fr. Marcelo Barros sees clues in nature as he ponders the potential and complementarities innate within what he terms "priestly" or hiero-diversity. Diversity is good because life as it is is diversified. According to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which produced a 1992 international treaty of biological and natural conservation, "biodiversity" refers not only the variety of living organisms existing on the land, in the air, and in water, but also to the complementarities and relationships among them: In order to live, beings are dependent not only on the health of their organism but also on a network of life, the 'ecosystem.'

When the scientific world uses the term "biological diversity," or the shorter term "biodiversity," they are most simply referring to the diversity, or a scope of different plants and animals and other living things in a particular area or region. Biodiversity also refers to the number, or abundance of different species living

within a particular region. Scientists often refer to the biodiversity of an ecosystem, a natural area made up of a *community* of plants, animals, and other living things in a particular physical and chemical environment.

Within the scientific community, diversity within biological systems is more than a description of an observed reality; it is diagnostic: diversity is evidence of health and viability. Lack of biological diversity is definitive evidence of a diseased system, one that is out of balance or worse—one where the inhabiting species are headed for extinction. Wide diversity of species within an ecosystem is considered necessary to preserve the web of life that sustains all living things. In his 1992 best-seller, *The Diversity of Life*, Harvard University biologist Edward O. Wilson, known as the "father of biodiversity," said, "It is reckless to suppose that biodiversity can be diminished indefinitely without threatening humanity itself."⁶¹

To speak of biodiversity for my purposes is not, first and foremost, to offer a theory, but rather to call attention to the empirical reality of elements natural to human social systems, the sciences, cultures, and religions. This is a prerequisite if we are to care for one another as well as our world. It is our interconnectedness that forms the context for our shared actions going forward as Gebara explains:

To speak of religious and cultural biodiversity is to attempt to give the human community an understanding of itself as a structure that will once again allow it to live out relationships that are more personal, closer to nature, and in deeper contact with the dreams and hopes of the great variety of human groups. To speak of 'biodiversity' is to affirm the fact of process, of the evolution of the cosmos, of the earth, and of all beings—and their need to organize their shared living in a variety of ways. ⁶²

We are part of something bigger than ourselves: biodiversity is important because everything that lives in an ecosystem is part of the web of life, including humans. Each species of vegetation and each creature has a place on the earth and plays a vital role in the circle of life and a cycle of interdependence . “Plant, animal, and insect species interact and depend upon one another for what each offers, such as food, shelter, oxygen, and soil enrichment.”⁶³

A theology of *hierro*-diversity applies the same principle to people. No group can live without the sustaining integration of others.⁶⁴ I am arguing that we take this construct to its natural edge: that the priestly source of diversity is at work in both nature and humanity. God has built diversity into the entire system. In other words, God has a creative plan that excludes no one and nothing.

As people of faith who believe in the divinity of creation, the revealed interconnectedness of all nature is evidence of the sheer magnitude of God's provisional design. It is a natural extension to conclude that human diversity is also part of God's natural architecture. Al Gore asks the provocative question in his book *Earth in Balance*: “Why does it feel slightly heretical for a Christian to suppose that God is in us as human beings?”⁶⁵ Gore's question is really poignant, and speaks to the instinctive reluctance you might feel about my arguments as you read this project.

If you were to ask a botanist, chemist, or biologist if diversity is natural within the living world, they will tell you that is the wrong question. The better question is whether or not diversity is *essential*. Science understands that

interdependent systems are able to flourish because of and not despite their diversity. Diversity is not a threat to science, *lack of diversity is the threat.*

Therefore, the survival of species depends upon diversity; diversity is essential to life.

Where can we find religious teachings that recognize the essentiality of diversity for human thriving? Rabbi Jonathan Saks notes connections between the Creator's hand and both human diversity and biodiversity. In 2002 he wrote a critique about globalization and against the so-called clash of civilizations. Seeing God in the widest understanding of diversity he wrote, "What is real and the proper object of our wonder is not the platonic form of a leaf but the 250,000 different kinds there actually are; not the quintessential bird but the 9,000 species that exist today; not the metalanguage that embraces all others, but the 6,000 languages still spoken throughout the world. Thanks to our new-found knowledge of DNA we now know that all life in its astonishing complexity had a single origin[God]."66 In addition, the presence of DNA is also a creative and thus a divine clue. Science tells us that the genetic code is the same in every creature. The proteins arginine and alanine are the same whether found in bats, in beetles, or in bacteria. Wherever you go in the world, whatever human, animal, plant, bug or blob you look at, if it is alive, it will use the same dictionary and know the same code. All life is one.

Global ecologist Anup Shah explains that,

"Biodiversity boosts ecosystem productivity where each species, no matter how small, all have an important role to play. For example, a larger number of plant species means a greater variety of crops; greater species diversity ensures natural sustainability for all life forms; and healthy ecosystems can better withstand and recover from a variety of disasters. And so, while we dominate this planet, we still need to preserve the diversity in wildlife."⁶⁷

If we were to exchange the term *hierro*-diversity for biodiversity the positive effects would remain. *Hiero*-diversity boosts communal productivity where each person, no matter his or her station, has an important role to play. Biodiversity and balance are crucial for all of earth, not just humans, not just animals, and not just amoeba. The presence of *Hiero*-diversity is just as essential for humans. It should give us pause and hope that when humanity exhales, our carbon dioxide becomes the fuel of photosynthesis, with the resulting oxygen becoming the air we breathe. Who does not see God in the sacred and life sustaining cycle of all diversity?

Theologian Sally McFague makes this same point when she speaks of the incarnation as the means of the embodied response of every person on earth.

In her book *A New Climate for Theology* she writes:

"We have been given permission to love the world by the incarnation of God in the world. Thus, our assignment becomes figuring out what loving the world means....This new worldview says that all human beings and other life-forms are interrelated and interdependent....In the old picture, human beings were seen as God's darlings, as the special ones who merited salvation in heaven with God. In the new picture, human beings are seen as caretakers of God's household, the earth, just as Adam and Eve were told to tend the garden. In other words, It is God's nature to be embodied, to be the one in whom we live and move and have our being in." ⁶⁸

That God is with us in the flesh in Jesus Christ (and universally in one another) is a model that is particularly appropriate for interpreting the Christian doctrine of creation in our time of climate change. McFague's metaphorical model of the world as God's body is appropriate (as well as being in continuity with the Christian incarnational tradition) because it encourages us to focus on what McFague metaphorically and literally calls "*the neighborhood*,"⁶⁹ locally and globally. From this worldview we are called to care for the earth and for one another, meeting God in the world and especially in the flesh of the world: in feeding the hungry, healing the sick—and in reducing greenhouse gases. An incarnational understanding of creation says there is nothing is too lowly, too physical, too minor a labor if it helps creation to flourish.⁷⁰

If we are not convinced of our interconnectedness and call to care for one another, perhaps it is because we are not certain how literally to receive the doctrine of the creation. Consider the viewpoint of Francis S. Collins, head of the Human Genome Project, and one of the world's leading scientists. Collins sees empirical, not anecdotal, proof of an intelligent creator given the precise tolerances built into the design of the universe. He posits that without intelligent design, the universe would surely have collapsed in on itself. The sense of awe created by these realizations has caused more than a few agnostic scientists to sound downright theological.⁷¹ Similarly in his book *God and Astronomers*, astrophysicist Robert Jastrow writes this final paragraph:

"At this moment it seems as though science will never be able to raise the curtain on the mystery of creation. For the scientist who has lived by his

faith in the power of reason, the story ends like a bad dream. He has scaled the mountains of ignorance; he is about to conquer the highest peak; as he pulls himself over the final rock, he is greeted by a band of theologians who have been sitting there for centuries."⁷²

I take both men's writings as supporting proof that belief in God as the creator of the universe is a reasonable assertion. It appears science and faith are beginning to work together for our common understanding, helping the world see how creation is evidence of a stunning design plan. Collins also sees the formerly separate disciplines working together when he writes, "Scientists and theologians are now reaching into new arenas, investigating the natural and spiritual world in new ways, digging deeper into territory where understanding is incomplete."⁷³

Sallie McFague can help us imagine creation as a fully cooperative, and harmonious. She sees that,

"God is the milieu in which we exist—exist at all levels and in all ways, but in ways that begin and end with the body. By imagining all of us as making up the matrix of God's body, she too hears this as a call to sacred action. This model asks us to play with the possibility that Christianity is not about two worlds—the transcendent, heavenly one where we really belong (and where God abides) and the imminent, earthly one where we work out our salvation in sin and sorrow (and from which God is absent). Rather, the world as God's body suggests that there is *one* world, one reality, and this world, this reality, is divine."⁷⁴

If the world exists within God or if in the lovely words of Julian of Norwich, God holds the world as one holds a hazelnut in one's hand—then God is everywhere. God is either everywhere or nowhere. God cannot be in "one place" and not "another place"; a "being" might do that, but not God. God is

right under the surface of everything.⁷⁵ It is amazing to me that such a thought could be a surprise. Why is it so easy for humanity to isolate aspects of its beliefs, seeing God as creator yet stopping short of seeing God as creator of everything: every creature, every person, and every system? Science and religion have ignored each other for too long. Actually this is an understatement as science and religion have been violently at odds with one another since at least the time of Galileo and Copernicus. Religion has been outright condemnative --literally--toward science's greatest pioneers and discoveries. One of the Church's injustices has been to refute science and deny the wisdom of the natural world. *Hiero-diversity* offers yet another opportunity for reconciliation—this time between the church and the scientific community. Seeing both camps begin to discuss and investigate similar ideas is one more example of the global communion possible. I can almost hear God saying with a smile, "Finally!"

We should not be surprised that if one is willing to accept the argument that the Big Bang required a Creator, that the essential presence of bio-diversity in nature is a clue to its similar existence and benefit in humanity, then it is not a long leap to suggest that the Creator has established the parameters (physical constants, physical laws, spiritual hope, and so on) in order to accomplish a particular goal.

In the final sentences of *A Brief History of Time*, referring to a hoped-for time when an eloquent and unified theory of everything is developed, Stephen

Hawking says, "Then we shall all, philosophers, scientists, and just ordinary people, be able to take part in the discussion of the question of why it is that we and the universe exist. If we find the answer to that, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the mind of God." ⁷⁶

The presence and promise of diversity is but one clue to God's greatest imagination for her creation. Diversity is God's "systems" approach. Diversity is not only conceptual, it's personal. Each of us carries a holy "x-factor" of interrelated purpose, context and potential. If we could embody and imagine what living this reality could do for our world, it would be the ultimate triumph of human reason—for then we would know the *heart* of God.

Science has taught us that over a long period of time a series of observations can lead us to new frameworks of understanding, that framework later given the description of being a "theory." That is my greatest imagination for this thesis—that it is a theory—the theory that God has indeed built diversity into the world, into biology, into humanity and into the solutions and communion that such awareness can catalyze. Part of embracing this theory is that we become stewards (caretakers) of it as well as stewards of our own identity and responsibility as incarnational beings. God does have the whole web in her hands and she is asking us to hold it with her.

*All manifestations of fear are reflections of the fact that
humanity has forgotten its spiritual identity.
Marianne Williamson*

Chapter 5

The Stewardship of Identity

Sometimes art indeed imitates life. In 2001 actors Julie Andrews and Anne Hathaway starred in a film titled *The Princess Diaries*. Hathaway played the part of Mia Thermopolis, a teenager who discovers that she is the heir to the throne of the fictional country Genovia, ruled by her grandmother Queen dowager Clarisse Renaldi, portrayed by Julie Andrews. The newfound knowledge of Mia's royal roots transforms Hathaway's character from an awkward teenager to a princess of the people who helps orphans and inspires kindness. The character is scripted as living fully out of what the French would term "noblesse oblige" meaning the benevolent, honorable behavior considered to be the responsibility of persons of high birth or rank--noble obligation. Films like this and similar Cinderella stories may tap not into wishful thinking but rather into a deep knowing that we too could be of royal birth and that our identities have been undervalued. To speak of our diversity as incarnational is to tap into a present-but-latent vein of priestly (of the Creator) heritage. Without the secure knowledge of our truest identity, we are left to disrespect ourselves and each other; our lives are unnecessarily "rudderless."

Throughout the development of this project I have had the opportunity to talk with many people about their newly described incarnational identity.

Without exception, the idea has resonated with each person. I believe we are somehow predisposed to this truth, which leads me to conclude that until now we have been looking at our identity through a small hole in God's fence. What lay beyond that limited landscape is my greatest hope. Understanding ourselves as incarnational beings living in a global community of other incarnational beings is an entirely different worldview than the one we are familiar with.

So what now? As with any shift in identity and worldview, we are invited to enter a time of formation. Formation takes shape first through awareness, and awareness nurtured ultimately leads to a complete evolution of consciousness. It is this evolution that can lead us to embodied actions in the world, actions that show love and give life. I purposefully say "can lead" as opposed to "will lead." The verb *can* infers possibility and free agency—it implies choice and alternatives, rather than inevitabilities. Incarnational diversity is nothing more than a nice theory unless it leads to action, unless it leads to our deliberately, intentionally trying on new ways of being in the world. First, we must seek and recognize new ways of understanding ourselves, and make a choice to become stewards of our new incarnational identity. Then, we may advance to stewardship over our mutual obligations and collective future. Such stewardship is the subject of this last chapter.

One part of stewardship is the recognition that the only hierarchy that matters is our collective connection to each other through the God who created us. As a result of embracing the blessing of our own identity, we are in

a position to help those around us and vice versa. The embrace and stewardship of our identity can provide a stable foundation upon which we can build or renew our spirituality, as well as begin to co-create a world capable of sustaining and giving life. But what does *embracing the blessing of our incarnational identity* mean in real life? What does such an embrace look like in daily practices, behaviors, and values in and beyond the church?

My colleague and EDS classmate, Rev. Pat Bumgardner, recently made a mission trip to Pakistan. After returning to Cambridge she told us about meeting a young Pakistani girl. The child asked Pat “Why did they not throw candy into the street when I was born?”⁷⁷ I learned she was referring to a Pakistani custom of celebrating the birth of boys. After experiencing and being affirmed by Pat, the young girl vowed that when she grows up she will throw candy even for girl babies. It may seem a small thing but it represented a paradigmatic leap of consciousness for that child. Before Pat she wasn’t certain her life mattered. In the minutes she was with Pat, she moved from devalued to re-valued, simply because she was told that she mattered. Identity formation is a journey and this young girl began hers because she was affirmed for perhaps the first time in her life. *Hiero-diversity* was not the direct topic of their conversation and yet it factored in because two children of God encountered the divine in each other, expressed through loving action. Both parties were deeply affected.

The sad truth is that too many of the world’s children and adults have been told in word and action that some bodies matter and some bodies do not.

The Pakistani girl had gotten the message (all too clearly) that her girl-body did not matter, and yet something within her was expecting a different message—one that matched up with what the strength of her spirit was telling her.

Similarly, in many cultures some racial identities matter and others do not. In racist, white-dominant cultures, the lighter your skin, the more easily accepted you are and the greater status you have. Children internalize sexist and racist attitudes, and the foundations of self-esteem are built or destroyed by these messages. Lives are all too often built on institutions of injustice, but incarnational diversity can be a different kind of a building block. Through it, we celebrate all the variations and particularities of God's creation, not because *hierodiversity* is color *blind* but because it affirms what *binds* us together; our "of the creator" identity. It is not about blending into a giant whole; it is about being seen, affirmed, and thereby known because of who we are as individuals. *Hierodiversity* imagines a world where differences are accepted—and celebrated.

My first premise was that there exists a *mystical* opportunity and critical need to re-imagine diversity. By *mystical* I am referring to the experiential nature of what Sallie McFague calls "God's body." She writes, "Christians are invited to imagine the entire universe—all matter and energy in their billions of differentiated forms—as God with us or, more accurately, as the body, the matrix, in which we live and move and have our being.⁷⁸" Learning to live out of that "being" is an essential part of our identity formation and evolution; the learning to walk our incarnation out into the world through our lived action.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin spoke of evolutions of consciousness that lead to “christification” or to the “christosphere”, the center from which we apprehend the divinity of love and live out of those apprehensions in our daily lives.⁷⁹ The capacity and call to connect with the source of divine love through our priestly heritage is an important attribute of *hiero*-diversity. In fact it is the point. Such understanding cracks us open, inviting and involving us in God’s creative work in the world. We become part of it because we are part of it.

As a child of the 1950s and 1960s I can feel my hippy make-love-not-war consciousness being tapped as I attempt to articulate what has been living inside me on this topic. Again, our identity as incarnational beings is only a nice idea unless we can live out of it and apply it to real world suffering. To shift humanity’s paradigm of exploitation, greed, and me-first living, to one of seeing each other as brother and sister, is an enormous undertaking. It is, however, a challenge worth taking on. Ivone Gebara says this is based on “a frame of reference that incorporates a broader understanding of universal brotherhood/sisterhood and a devotion to all the manifestations of this one and multiform Sacred Body.”⁸⁰ The ultimate manifestation of such a universal brotherhood and sisterhood would be the achievement of God’s shalom. The stewardship of our individual sacred identity must precede what could eventually lead us to world peace. Our identities could get in the way as much as help such an endeavor.

Rabbi Jared Saks sees paradox in the pursuit of peace. In his book *The Dignity of Difference*, Rabbi Saks sought to dispel the negative conclusions of Samuel Huntington's book, *The Clash of Civilizations*. Rabbi Saks believes that the pursuit of peace involves a kind of betrayal of our identities. It involves compromise. "It means settling for less than one would like. It [peace] has none of the purity and clarity of war, in which the issues—self-defense, national honor, patriotism, pride—are unambiguous and compelling. War speaks to our most fundamental sense of identity: there is an 'us' and a 'them' and no possibility of confusing the two. When enemies shake hands, who is the 'us' and who the 'them'? Peace involves a profound crisis of identity."⁸¹ Another aspect then of our new identity formation will be the recasting of "them" to the collective "us." The logic and values system of "us/them" is part of what incarnational diversity will dismantle.

There is certain wisdom to Sak's assertion, wisdom that should inform the assessment that precedes any strategy. I have heard a definition of ministry as the practice of meeting people where they are and then assisting them on their journey. The problem, in this case, is not our inflated sense of identity but rather our lack thereof. Like schoolyard bullies, when we are uncertain of our truest identity, we fight to assert ourselves in an attempt to compensate for whatever it is we lack or fear we lack. Victory in war is a sad substitute for a deeper knowing of our place and potential in the cosmos. It imprisons us in false identity. War is another "wrong jungle."

In her book *Longing for Running Water*, feminist theologian Ivone Gebara, quotes Albert Einstein's call to humanity:

"Human beings are a part of the whole we call the Universe; they are a tiny fragment of time and space. However, they regard themselves, their ideas, and their feelings, as separate and apart from all the rest. It is something like an optical illusion in their consciousness. This illusion is a sort of prison; it restricts us to our personal aspirations and limits our affective life to a few people very close to us. Our task should be to free ourselves from this prison, opening up our circle of compassion in order to embrace all living creatures and all of nature in its beauty."⁸²

Indeed there is the paradox of potential within incarnational diversity, just as there is a paradox of potential within love, the greatest of God's commandments. Embracing it involves hope and comes not with guarantees; embracing our holy identity bears the potential of fruit. Fortunately we Christians are people of Easter hope. At our best we are eternal optimists. It has been said that our hope in God is not a hope for something to happen in the world, but for something to happen in us. The rest then is up to us. The job before us is to *imagine* and walk it out into the world, seeing every act and every word as holy.

Kwok Pui Lan writes, "To imagine means to discern that something is not fitting, to search for new images, and to arrive at new patterns of meaning and interpretation."⁸³ To imagine is also to risk opening ourselves to God's imagination and God's prompting, leading us to see new contours, new shapes previously in shadow. EDS graduate, Rev. Dr. Nori Rost, speaks of the Holy Spirit as a genie straining to be let out of her restrictive bottle. I believe the genie

emerges a little at a time as each of us is courageous enough to pay attention to her whispers.

Former Catholic, now Anglican Priest, Matthew Fox has done just that in his liberation of the construct of original sin. Fox has re-imagined original sin, opening himself to the new revelation of original *blessing*. Original blessing is natural from the perspective of hiero-diversity. It follows that because we are created in the image of a good and loving God, then we as God's children are intrinsically good—not evil. This is both an explosion of possibility and the continued transformation of positive identity. In no small part, the re-imagined construct of original blessing was a catalyst within the holy hunch of incarnational diversity.

I want to emphasize that this is not empty idealism. I have seen transformation first hand with a parishioner who had internalized parental abuse as evidence of her certain and complete worthlessness. In no small way she may be alive because of her new identity. Previously she had concluded that because God did not rescue her from her abusers, God either did not care, or hated her, or worse, God did not exist. In working with her I have combined narrative counselling with teaching her about both original blessing and incarnational diversity. Little by little it is liberating her to a possibility previously unimagined. Deeply wounded, she has not yet embraced the fullness of her identity but she has begun to hope that it could be true. These simple but profound truths have pulled her from the jaws of suicide to live another day,

week, month, and year. It has given her a foundation to build upon; I hope that this foundation will support her toward the moments when she is sufficiently healed to be able to bless others in the future, thus taking her place among a global community of mutual caregivers. Ironically she is more focused on helping others than helping herself. She is just now beginning to see that she cannot draw from an empty well and needs to shore up her own identity and strength first. Previously, stewardship of her own identity was not on her radar. Just as airline flight attendants instruct us to secure our own oxygen masks before attempting to help others with theirs, genuine and global community starts with individual self-love and self-care.

Global human community is possible as the individuals who comprise it wake up to their new identity. Author, professor and missiologist Christopher Duraisingh makes a passionate plea for this global human community. He writes that "today more than ever before, the world cries out for credible signposts to show that human community is still possible in the midst of all that divides us."⁸⁴ Human community celebrates the sacred creative force inherent, present, and available in us all; human community builds a world through co-creative vision and praxis. Similarly, Yale missiologist, Lamen Sanneh, suggests, "For all of us pluralism can be a rock of stumbling, but for God it is the cornerstone of the universal design."⁸⁵

According to Christopher Duraisingh, within our Christian tradition, the most powerful paradigm for re-imagining and negotiating diversity as God's universal design is Pentecost,

"The day when through the operation of the Holy Spirit, the quests for integration and uniqueness are drawn together so that diversity in communion and harmony is affirmed. The narrative in Acts 2 takes care to hold the terms "each" and "all" in creative tension. Each hears in his or her native tongue and thus monologic traditions are overturned and vernacularization takes place. All cultures and all languages are affirmed, yet none becomes the norm."⁸⁶

That famous day of Pentecost, when the disciples were huddled in the upper room, God's immanence took the form of the Holy Spirit. Despite their grief at Jesus' death, they had been promised they would never be alone. What they did not grasp in that moment was that there was "good news" in seeing God in each other, good news that their future acts of evangelism and service were in service of that same paradigm—caring for God by caring for one another. When we embody the sacred identity God has imbued in us, when we let it inspire our actions, the world could change in a day. God created us that we might give ourselves away in service to our world. That is the purpose for which I identify, the hope of my sacred identity.

Conclusion

Queering Diversity to its Natural Edge

My own sense of identity and urgency were catapulted forward on the morning of September 11, 2001. I awoke suddenly in my dorm room at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary in Berkeley, California. No alarm clock had sounded and yet I jumped to my feet somehow knowing that there had been a major disturbance in the cosmic field. Though it was not part of my routine I instinctively turned on the radio. That is when I heard the news coming out of New York that the World Trade Towers had been destroyed. An hour later, my head still spinning, I headed to Pacific School of Religion for my systematic theology class taught by Choan-Seng (C.S.) Song. Every student in class was shaken, full of anxiety about how as spiritual leaders we could ever hope to make sense out of such a terrorist act. One of the students yelled out what many of us were afraid to name, "How could a good God let this happen?" Professor Song smiled. It was a smile born of deep wisdom and life experience. I remember he was still fishing papers out of his briefcase as he settled into his physical routine for the morning.

His response challenged my theology when he asked, "Where did you get the idea that God was in the business of saving you?" The discussion that followed planted the seeds for how I now understand the God-world relationship. It followed that if the world is going to be saved from violent acts of misunderstood identity, it will have to be an "inside job." In other words we are

going to have to save each other. As God has loved us, we must learn to love our neighbor—all our neighbors. It is that simple and that complicated. Hope or horror, it is our choice and to the extent that the outcome is one of hope, it is the work we share with God, the work modeled for us through Christ's ministry.

It is impossible not to see that Jesus was the greatest champion of diversity. As Christians, we look to Jesus as our heritage example of the actualized potential present in each of us. Everything about the way Jesus' life is presented is an essential clue to humanity moving beyond potential to lived reality. His life and ministry invites us to consider two important questions; 1) what did Jesus do with *his* incarnation? And 2) what shall we do with *ours*? In other words, what does it look like to live incarnationally? Following the path Jesus illuminated for us can help us walk with greater determination along our own path. According to Diana Butler Bass sees diversity illustrated his ministry. "His earliest followers gathered into culturally diverse congregations where Jews, Gentiles, Samaritans, and Africans worshiped and served God together. Besides being racially and ethnically diverse, early Christians held a variety of theological views and created varied spiritual practices that shaped the new religion."⁸⁷ The New Testament depicts Jesus' followers as one of the most diverse groups imaginable. He never issued a demand for uniformity. Rather, he beckoned people to follow with a promise of healing, transformation, and love. "He did not say that his followers would be alike; he said that despite their

differences, they would be changed by love: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (John 15:9)⁸⁸

C. S. Song observes Jesus' example of incarnational living as it relates to his theology of human community. Song writes,

What Jesus strove for was a theology of human community that embodies the richness of God's creation and that is shaped by its marvellous pluralism. We hold creation in us and creation hold us in itself. It is this inner space, Jesus seems to be saying, it is this spiritual capacity within us that gives us the strength to deal with our everyday problems and the courage to meet the challenges of life. This theology of life is at once spacious and deep. It is spacious because it is related to creation. It is deep because it enables us to fathom the depth of God's caring love in us. This must be what Jesus wanted to say to his listeners. He was not offering instant solutions to their problems. What he was doing was empowering them to relate themselves to God and God's creation.⁸⁹

It is precisely this—relational empowerment, spacious and deep—that is at the heart of incarnational diversity. The awareness of our direct and priestly connection to God along with our connections to each other elevates neighbor to include every person on earth without hierarchical distinction. No one is above and no one is below in God's eyes.

One purpose then of this conclusion is to acknowledge that there is much left to say and even more to do. What I have tried to do in the preceding chapters is to awaken us to diversity as a natural, purposeful and an essential part of God's love and methodology for the communion and care of the beloved human community. What I have tried to demonstrate in these five chapters is that incarnational diversity, in all its permutations, is worth paying attention to. It is worth paying attention to because of the ways it can deepen

our Christian identity and at the same time advance God's mission of justice and reconciliation. Because I believe *hieros* diversity has its origins in the heart of God, I have tried to weave together the theological, the scientific, and the collective experiential, pointing us towards a new way of looking at God's immanence in the world. While it must begin as a source of personal reflection, my goal has been the development of a capacity building pedagogy and within that, a constructive theology of diversity, a hermeneutic lens whereby diversity can be considered anew, celebrated, and lived into. It is my greatest hope that *hieros* diversity will assist and inspire us to work across differences in solving the issues that affect us all.

All this has led me in my practice of ministry to expanded ways of seeing and being in Christian community; specifically leading me to ideas for how to shape worship, welcome, pastoral care, community life, and spiritual activism. I hope that by sharing some of my ministry experience, I can provide ideas that help us navigate both church and world together. I will also share the comments from the survey participants who were exposed to this idea of incarnational diversity, and I will also leave us with questions for reflection designed to begin in earnest our journey of evolutionary consciousness as planetary incarnational sons and daughters of God.

Shaping worship and welcome

Diverse congregations are the norm and not the exception in Metropolitan Community Churches (MCC). In the over the forty years since our

founding we have progressed to an understanding that diversity is our greatest asset. After all, we came to exist not because of what we believe but rather because of who we are. The vast majority of MCC members are either gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and many are allies who share our hope for LGBT equality. Still, as in many churches, congregants often assume there is greater theological sameness and common experience than there really is. It is for that reason that we take every opportunity to language diversity into worship, welcome, and beyond. In today's world communities of faith must be fluent in the language of and the treatment of diversity without limitation. Our church website (www.agcmcc.org) describes us by saying that "We are a diverse community of people from many traditions, bringing the best of our faith experiences to share with others to enlarge our concept of God's grace and to be a blessing to our world." It also reads, "We celebrate our many backgrounds in worship, music, education, ministries, leadership, and membership, appreciating and nurturing the gifts each offers to the whole." It is not enough to simply acknowledge the existence of diversity, which is why we celebrate it and name the many ways and places we experience it. We privilege our diversity by acknowledging it through our name-- *All God's Children* Metropolitan Community Church. Every aspect of life together clarifies and reminds us of our own pluralism.

Welcome

When we welcome people at the beginning of a service, we reference our diverse worship practices. A typical welcome would include, "Welcome to All God's Children. This is *your* worship service, meaning that if you want to stand up, raise your arms, dance in the aisle or sit quietly in contemplation, it is your choice." Our personalities also come into play on occasional Sundays. We've been known to co-opt our Minnesotan "Prairie Home Companion" location by saying, "Welcome to All God's Children Metropolitan Community Church, where the men are pretty, women are strong, and the children are all above average." Though Garrison Keillor was not referring to a largely LGBT audience when he created his famous line, in our setting it acknowledges certain charms unique to our particularities. When offered, it is always met with warm laughter.

On a more serious note, our table invitation for Holy Communion at every MCC speaks to a different particularity of our community, that of having been excluded from receiving communion at our former churches. This is especially true for the many Catholics who are AGCMCC members. For this reason we say, "This is an open communion, for this is God's table and God's invitation. You do not have to be a member of this church or any church to share a meal in community with us and with Christ. Come, the table is ready." As the people come forward for communion, each is served the elements (bread and juice) followed by a brief and individual prayer. It is at this time that we pronounce a brief blessing, reminding the person that they are loved exactly as they are and

that they are beloved by God. Being welcomed to a table that has been for some a source of exclusion and not unity is a hallmark of MCC. The diversities present begin to slowly understand that regardless of how their journey has brought them to us, they are known and they are celebrated now that they are here.

We have found that there are many ways to embrace, explore, and experience *hiero*-diversity in a primarily LGBT church. I often remind congregants that “while other churches welcome us *despite* our being gay, MCC welcomes us *because* we are gay. Our gifts are unique to us as individuals and in this place those unique gifts are not only acknowledged, they are nurtured.” It is not an unusual thing to see first time visitor weeping throughout the service, feeling that at long last they have come home.

Additionally, we are always cognizant of the diverse faith backgrounds people come from. Instructions are given without exclusionary insider language. We explain exactly what will happen during various parts of the service so that people know what to expect. This is essential so people can begin to feel a sense of belonging. Many of the people who find their way through our doors may have been marginalized or violated by their former communities. It may have been years since they have been inside a church. Brochures about the church are always close by in the pew racks, placed there to familiarize them with our history and purpose. Not everyone will be familiar with our liturgy, (especially since we change it continuously in order to keep it diverse) so we

offer preambles such as “Please turn to page three in your service bulletin and join us in our prayer of confession.” I remember the first time I attended an unfamiliar church. I noticed people making the sign of the cross at various times and I asked the person next to me how they knew when to do that? The person on my left said that they had been coming since birth and they just knew. A person who overheard my question pointed to a small red cross symbol in the book of worship as the instruction for when to cross one’s self. Attending worship for the first time should never be designed in such a way as to make people feel uncomfortable or worse, stupid.

The sermon is another area where we carefully attend to diversity that is theological, cultural, and gender-, race-, and identity-based. The sermon provides an opportunity to re-imagine the stories of scripture in ways that lift up our all our lives, *inclusive* of LGBT people, applying the stories as a continued call to justice. When I am preaching about Jesus’ final days of ministry, I would not speak about atonement, I would speak of Jesus’ identity being on trial and his willingness to speak truth to power, despite knowing that the punishment would be death. On transfiguration Sunday, I would draw parallels between coming out and un-veiling ourselves before God and the world. Queering our biblical interpretations shows congregants that they too can interpret the bible for themselves.

The liturgy itself is also “queered” for a diverse audience. While we generally follow the classical order of service (gather, word, meal, and send),

we often include rites or blessings not found in other churches. Our congregation is home to a number of transgender men and women for whom we have created an annual naming service. This is a time when they are introduced to the congregation using their self-chosen (non-birth) and gender appropriate name. It is one of the most moving services because it ritually blesses the name they will use and be known by in the records of the church. We also acknowledge couple anniversaries, sharing the number of years they've been together. This is done as much to educate the community about the many long-term relationships that exist. Even for those inside the community the false notion that all gay relationships are short lived must continually be corrected.

I am particularly proud of an addition we made this year for Easter. Forty five percent of my congregation comes from Catholic backgrounds. We added a progressive Stations of the Cross service to Holy Week, completely re-writing the meditations to feature diverse interpretations for feminists, queer people, liberation theologians, and generally progressive Christians. This was particularly moving for many Catholics who missed including the Stations of the Cross in their Holy Week observance and particularly eye-opening for non-Catholics who enjoyed learning about and experiencing the stations.

Pastoral Care

Nowhere do we experience more diversity than in the situations and relationships encountered through pastoral care at a largely LGBT church with people seeking spiritual direction and pastoral care for a variety of circumstances. The most common reasons people seek pastoral care are for assistance with coming out, dealing with non-affirming families, relationship counselling, and spiritual growth. In many circumstances the individual or couple arrive wounded and spiritually violated. They represent diverse theological backgrounds and do not always realize that their former church had a particular worldview; they only know that they were told they were sick, sinful, and that their lives were an abomination before God. Pastoral care in this setting requires a gentle blend of listening, counselling and especially education.

I have found the counselling model known as “narrative therapy” very helpful in my setting. Narrative therapy “seeks to be a respectful, non-blaming approach to counselling and community work, which centers people as experts in their own lives. It views problems as separate from people and assumes people have many skills, competencies, beliefs, values, commitments and abilities that will assist them to reduce the influence of problems in their lives.”⁹⁰ I utilize this model because the people I work with have often learned to tell their story in oppressive ways, ways that continue along a course of self-marginalization. This is the case with the woman mentioned earlier who had

created a story that God never loved her because if God had, she would have been rescued from abuse. Narrative therapy has given me tools to help people like her reframe their stories, reconnecting dots differently so as to draw new meaning and new conclusions.

Incarnational diversity now plays a regular role in my pastoral care work. I find it a great antidote to the spiritual violence experienced by so many. When I can speak to someone about original blessing versus the original sin they were taught and when I can tell them of God's unconditional love, transformation begins. By including incarnational diversity in the conversation, they come to understand themselves as unique and loved creations, part of God and not separate from God. Embracing their own incarnational diversity is far more liberating than simply being told what the bible does and doesn't say about their life. Any attempt to interpret text in this setting continues the war between "us and them" interpretations. When someone has been wounded and marginalized, they develop the tenacious skill set of being able to prove their own unworthiness, no longer needing help from the outside after the damage has been done. Narrative therapy has proven to be a gentle partner, helping people change their own minds and their own narratives. When combined with the consciousness raising possibilities of incarnational diversity, pastoral care takes on both healing and transformative potential. It is still a ministry of listening presence, elevated as needed by spirit driven counselling.

Community Life

Returning to C.S. Song's systematic theology course, I remember fondly something he wrote about community in his own book, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology*. It is reminiscent of All God's Children MCC, as well as other MCC congregations I am familiar with. He wrote that "A self-contained community that exists for itself and that protects its own interest has to give way to a community that is open, a community that consists of people from different backgrounds and traditions, a community prompted by service to others and dedicated to the well-being of the human community."⁹¹ Living with this type of balance is a delicate process, one that we take seriously in my congregation. All God's Children MCC is indeed open to people of different backgrounds whether they are allies or other LGBT people. We try to live by the words printed on a sanctuary wall banner: "Blessed and Blessing Others." This has deep meaning for me because at times it feels as if we are running a level one trauma center for the spiritually abused. People often arrive wounded, receive blessing and then become involved in the helping of others. There is a sacred synchronicity to this cycle.

Evangelism takes on new meaning in this context because is no longer about convincing people to accept Jesus in order to achieve or receive salvation; evangelism is simply sharing the good news that Jesus has illuminated a path of service and wholeness, and that there is a place like All God's Children that embodies the good news he taught. This is the glue, the common

bond shared in community life. We love and we serve because God first loved us; not as empty idealism but as lived practice borne of deep pain and exclusion.

It is at this point that I must say something about racism. Racism continues to exist and it has left deep scars on the souls, lives and bodies of people of color who have been marginalized and wounded. I had the occasion recently to interview a local first grade teacher in my community. I sought her feedback on this project from the perspective of a person of color. Monica is bi-racial, raised in a largely white Danish Lutheran church in St. Paul, Minnesota. I introduced her to incarnational diversity and asked for her thoughts. She was quiet for a long time, breaking her silence by telling me first of an experience in the white church that still has repercussions today. During her confirmation class the students were asked to create a painting of Jesus. Monica's painting appropriately portrayed Jesus as a kind and dark skinned man. She was intensely proud of what she had created despite being surrounded in this environment by the images of a white Jesus. To her surprise and my horror, the leadership of the church denied her painting and refused to let it be displayed. It was a crushing experience for Monica. Here is her response to incarnational diversity: "I am a dreamer and this resonates with me. If people really let this sink in, it could bring people together finally. Incarnational diversity is not black and white, it is neutral. I can see that you're not talking about making people blind to color but letting all our colors come through as equal in God's eyes and

hopefully in each others.” As we continued our discussion I asked Monica if speaking of incarnational diversity as royal birth would bring up issues of masters and slaves. She quickly said, “No! When you said it that’s not where I went. I went in my imagination to the stories of the royal black families of Africa, of Egypt and of Ethiopia. I think this has the power to lift all our heads.” Finally, I asked her how best to have multi-racial congregations experience and explore incarnational diversity. She thought it best to gather people and ask them to share their stories. “Sharing stories show us that we walk together, our lives are similar and different, and it illustrates what we have in common. And now there is something new that we have in common.” (paraphrased)

When it comes to racism especially, incarnational diversity can be a tool, but it is no magic pill. Humanity will need to be vigilant, on guard for the ways racism can creep into our behaviors, our decisions, and our thinking despite our best hopes at becoming sensitive and embracing an anti-racist ideal. At its best, incarnational diversity can provide a check and balance, encouraging us to live out of an embodied equality, reminding us when we get off track to try again. In other words, incarnational diversity is a very good place to start. It also moves the transformational, evolutionary process from the head to the heart and to the spirit; a holy trinity of response.

As for my own congregation, this year we hope to take community life to a new level. We are planning a congregational diversity retreat based around sharing our stories and the new bonds that will come from the hearing of those

stories. We plan to gather as many as possible in our social hall for a new kind of table fellowship, organized a bit like “speed dating.”⁹² The people at each table will take turns and be given five minutes each to share their stories. Afterwards they will move to another table with different people and begin again. At the end of an afternoon, they will have been exposed to numerous stories, helping them bond with individuals they may have only known in passing. This goal concretizes the experience of what we often pronounce in worship benedictions, that “We have not just been *to* church, we *are* the church.”

This new congregational retreat was born out of recent “holy conversations” held as part of our churches strategic planning initiative. All God’s Children has been utilizing the work of Alice Mann and Gil Rendle from their book “Holy Conversations: Strategic Planning as Spiritual Discernment.” We gathered small conversation groups in private homes during Lent. As each group shared the stories of what brought them to our church and what has deepened their sense of belonging, we knew there was an opportunity to enlarge that experience. All God’s Children MCC is blessed to be good at seeing the beauty and seeing God in the diverse faces around us.

Spiritual Activism

Spiritual activism, the practice of walking one’s faith out into the world in political and social action, is at the core of Metropolitan Community Churches. We do not consider ourselves a church with a mission; rather we are a

movement with a church. We believe that the point of our faith is to fight oppression and inequity wherever it exists, especially where it affects other LGBT people. As a progressive Christian denomination we care more about how people treat one another than we care about how people articulate their theological beliefs. Spiritual activism is the lived expression of working to end oppression and educate people about how to care for one another. It takes many forms ranging from consciousness raising, to political demonstration, to check writing to everything in between. Partly because of the mixed success of the marriage equality movement, the analysts and activists of the LGBT political community are continually assessing and evolving its tactics. The latest wisdom is to move away from arguments based on equal rights towards strategies for the general public good. Incarnational diversity can be foundational to this new "public good" political strategy because it sees the sacred good in the individual *and* the greater community. It may be a long time down the road, however, to the extent that humanity begins to embrace the universal equality and sacred roots of every person, what is good for the public is what is good for the sum of the individuals, no exceptions.

Questions for Reflection and Closing Thoughts

The existential implications of divine diversity point all action and interactions towards the ethical consideration of Creator and creation—all of us. The embrace of such a rubric invite us to continually take stock, asking such questions as:

- What constitutes human flourishing?
- What actions would contribute to human flourishing?
- What actions would suppress or deny human flourishing?
- What is my role in God's action with my neighbors here at home and in terms of the wider world?

St. Paul, Minnesota is the home of the Catholic order of the Sisters of St. Joseph of Carondelet. Their consensus statement includes these beautiful words that capture an ethic of *hierro*-diversity: "The Sisters of Saint Joseph moves always towards profound love of God and love of neighbor without distinction from whom she does not separate herself and for whom, in the following of Christ she works in order to achieve unity of neighbor with neighbor and neighbor with God directly in this apostolate and indirectly through works of charity." Certainly Jesus' ministry example points Christians toward the building of neighborly relationships. Imagining such a world is not impossible, it is essential. Not long ago we thought it impossible to coordinate efforts to protect our environment and reverse the effects of global warming. Using Al Gore's

terminology of "an inconvenient truth,"⁹³ I insist that we cannot continue to do business in the world, and with our neighbor, in the same way we've conducted it in the past. We must put as much time and care into the strategic planning of human flourishing and human *becoming* as we have individual greed and hegemonic conquest. Quoting Denise Ackermann, "Mission in the midst of suffering requires an ethic of care that is unafraid to ask the difficult questions and to seek answers in communal moral praxis."⁹⁴

The catalyst, the motivation and the means of such praxis and imagination is a hermeneutic of *hiero-diversity*, and as a result, a holistic understanding of God's action in the world and God's hopes for the world--hopes we share partly out of our newly understood role in creation. God would not build unnecessary systems into such a beautiful creation.

Survey Says

In closing, I would like to share the comments offered by my "Incarnational Diversity Survey." The survey was designed specifically for this project to both gather information and open a space for consideration and reflection. The final question asked participants to react and comment on the following sentence: *"Diversity is part of God's intentional design. Each of us has a different and an important role to play in bringing wholeness and liberation to this world."*

Here are their thoughts:

- Our diversity propels us forward and leads us to learn new things and explore new ideas. God's infinite creativity and imagination has led to a world filled with innumerable species, including people whose strengths are derived from their uniqueness.
- Without the infinite differences between us, we may as well be clones.
- God created us in his image and likeness. Although we may consider another "different" we are ALL children of the creator. In other words, we are truly brothers and sisters and God is our Father.
- It means that we as humans play our own role in this world both as an individual and a group. We could be black, white, Asian, Mexican or Russian and still have a role in this world.
- It makes me feel good to know that GOD'S LOVE is a wholeness. It doesn't matter if we are Christian, Jewish, Islamic, or Buddhist, GOD IS PRESENT. My role is to show GOD'S LOVE through me in my actions and how I treat others.
- I believe we are all a piece of the puzzle. Only when we come together do we get a bigger picture. We complete each other. My weakness might be your strength. We need each other because we're different. When we get to know each other and share our stories, we see the commonalities and the differences as strengths that aren't threatening.

- If we were all the same, this would be a very boring life we lead. Diversity among us allows us to experience life outside of our mostly self-centered worlds.
- Absolutely - I cling to the image of the Body of Christ. We cannot all be eyes or ears or noses. None is greater than the other, and all are intrinsic to true life.
- I think God gave us diversity to challenge each other to contribute more to all of humanity.

The communion of our collective humanity is my greatest hope; genuine community is my spiritual longing. I imagine a place, as Pastor Steve from Goleta Presbyterian describes it, where people of many backgrounds and ages encounter a God that is alive, personal, powerful and full of love for all people. It's such a variety, and yet it's all lovingly held together as church [and one day as world].

In Diana Butler Bass's experience "diversity serves as a sign of God's love for all humanity." As a result of her work among the new meaning-making congregations she shared, "All along my journey through emerging mainline congregations, I found people who cherished diversity of every kind—political, theological, cultural and racial. They appreciated, as Geoffrey Chaucer wrote of his medieval pilgrims, "sundry folk" along the journey. For people on this way, diversity serves as a sign of God's love for all humanity.... it is the active

construction of a boundary-crossing community, a family bound not by blood but by love, that witnesses to the power of God's healing in the world." ⁹⁵

Divine diversity is a key to our self-actualization as children of God. It does away with previous divisions by consecrating us all to a single and royal class. It does indeed constitute sacramental encounter with the God in each of us. This is the growing edge of humanity.

And so it is.

Notes

- ¹ Kwok, Pui-lan, "Postcolonial Imagination: Historical, Dialogical, and Diasporic", in *idem, Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29.
- ² Christopher Duraisingh "Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis", ed. Ian Douglas (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), 129.
- ³ *Kindom* is an inclusive, gender neutral way of referring to God's kingdom
- ⁴ Sallie McFague, *The Body of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 159.
- ⁵ Jean L. McKechnie, Ed., *Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged* (Cleveland: World Publishing, 1960), 921.
- ⁶ Shelley, Bruce L., *Fine-Tuning the Incarnation*, an essay in Christianity Today 1966, accessed from <http://www.ctlibrary.com/4164>
- ⁷ Alister E. McGrath, ed., *The Christian Theological Reader*, Second Edition, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 256.
- ⁸ *The Christian Theological Reader*, 254.
- ⁹ Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 71.
- ¹⁰ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 184.
- ¹¹ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 185.
- ¹² Quoted from an audio interview within the United Church of Christ's adult education series "Dream. Be. Think. Do." Published by livingthequestions.com, 2009
- ¹³ Quoted from an audio interview within the United Church of Christ's adult education series "Dream. Be. Think. Do." Published by livingthequestions.com, 2009
- ¹⁴ John Shelby Spong, *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 238.
- ¹⁵ Sally McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 73.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ "For God So Loved the World: An Incarnational Theology", Martha Kirkpatrick, *Anglican Theological Review*, Spring 2009, Volume 91, Number 2, page 193
- ¹⁸ *A Course in Miracles*, second edition, (New York: The Foundation for Inner Peace, 1996), T-1 II.3-5, 7-8.
- ¹⁹ Luis Carlos Susin, "Introduction: Emergence and Urgency of the New Pluralist Paradigm." *Concilium* 2007/1: 1
- ²⁰ Holifield, E. Brooks. 1994. "Toward a History of American Congregations." In Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 16.
- ²¹ The Pew Research Center is a nonpartisan "fact tank" that provides information on the issues, attitudes and trends shaping America and the world. It does so by conducting public opinion polling and social science research; by reporting news and analyzing news coverage; and by holding forums and briefings. It does not take positions on policy issues.
- ²² *Norming* is a term used in the social and psychological sciences to refer to influencing what people consider to be normal, obvious or numerically prevalent.
- ²³ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 4.
- ²⁴ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 309.
- ²⁵ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 4.
- ²⁶ Diana Butler Bass *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 144-145.
- ²⁷ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 21.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, 22
- ²⁹ Diana Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 146.
- ³⁰ Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 145.

- ³¹ Christopher Duraisingh is the former Director of the Commission on World Mission and Evangelism of the World Council of Churches, and now the Otis Charles Professor of Applied Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
- ³² Christopher Duraisingh, *Contextual and Catholic: Conditions for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics*, Anglican Theological Review (ATR/LXXXII:4, 2000)681
- ³³ Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation: Imagining a New Old Church* (Herndon, VA: The Alban Institute, 2004), 19.
- ³⁴ Quoted from the stated mission, vision and values of All God's Children MCC, Minneapolis, MN
- ³⁵ Butler Bass, *The Practicing Congregation*, 8.
- ³⁶ Ibid., 9
- ³⁷ Ibid.,25
- ³⁸ Ibid.,26
- ³⁹ Christopher Duraisingh, *Contextual and Catholic: Conditions for Cross-Cultural Hermeneutics*, Anglican Theological Review (ATR/LXXXII:4, 2000) 681.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 681.
- ⁴¹ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 206.
- ⁴² Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water*, 211.
- ⁴³ Ian Douglas, ed., *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis* (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), 102.
- ⁴⁴ Samuel Huntington "The Clash of Civilizations" *Foreign Affairs*, (1993), Abstract summary.
<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations> (accessed via April 16, 2010)
- ⁴⁵ Samuel Huntington "The Clash of Civilizations" *Foreign Affairs*, (1993)
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- ⁴⁶ Luis Carlos Susin, "Introduction: Emergence and Urgency of the New Pluralist Paradigm." *Concilium* 2007/1: 1
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid.
- ⁴⁹ Marcelo Barros, "Dwellings of the Wind on Human Paths: Toward a Theology of Hiero-diversity" *Concilium*, No. 1 (2007),52.
- ⁵⁰ Leng Lim, *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed., Ian Douglas, (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), 129.
- ⁵¹ Ian Douglas, *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, xi preface
- ⁵² Marcelo Barros, "Dwellings of the Wind on Human Paths: Toward a Theology of Hiero-diversity" *Concilium*, No. 1,2007,50.
- ⁵³ Richard Parker was a January 2009 guest lecturer for EDS Course The Church, Globalization and the New United States Imperialism.
- ⁵⁴ This is a classic definition proposed by Sir Edward Burnett Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871), cited first by Anna Casella Paltrinieri, *Oltre le Frontiere: Antropologia per avvicinare I popoli*, Negarine di S. Pietro in Cariano: Il Segno dei Gabrieli, 2002, p. 38, cited again by Marcelo Barros, "Dwellings of the Wind on Human Paths: Toward a Theology of Hiero-diversity" *Concilium*, No. 1 (2007),50.
- ⁵⁵ Marcelo Barros, "Dwellings of the Wind on Human Paths: Toward a Theology of Hiero-diversity" *Concilium*, No. 1 (2007), 50.
- ⁵⁶ Samuel Huntington "The Clash of Civilizations" *Foreign Affairs*, Summer (1993),
<http://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/48950/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations>,(accessed April 16,2010),2.
- ⁵⁷ Huntington, Samuel. "The Clash of Civilizations" <http://www.foreignaffairs.org/19930601faessay5188-0/samuel-p-huntington/the-clash-of-civilizations.html>
- ⁵⁸ Ian Douglas, *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed., Ian Douglas, (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), xi preface
- ⁵⁹ Francis S.Collins, *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. (New York: Free Press, 2006), 58.
- ⁶⁰ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God*, 58.
- ⁶¹ Edward O. Wilson, *The Diversity of Life* (New York: W.W. Norton 1992), 346.
- ⁶² Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 207.

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- ⁶³ Source: California Bio Diversity Council website www.biodiversity.ca.gov
- ⁶⁴ Marcelo Barros, "Dwellings of the Wind on Human Paths: Toward a Theology of Hiero-diversity" *Concilium*, No. 1 (2007), 55.
- ⁶⁵ Al Gore, *Earth in Balance: Ecology and the Human Spirit* (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 265.
- ⁶⁶ Jonathan Saks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilization*, (New York: Continuum, 2002), 163.
- ⁶⁷ Anup Shah, *Why Is Biodiversity Important? Who Cares?*, <http://www.GlobalIssues.org>, Last updated: Sunday, December 2009
- ⁶⁸ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press) 2008, 72.
- ⁶⁹ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 73.
- ⁷⁰ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology*, 73.
- ⁷¹ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God*, (New York: Free Press/Simon & Schuster, 2006), 66.
- ⁷² Robert Jastrow, *God and Astronomers*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 107.
- ⁷³ Francis S. Collins, *The Language of God*, (New York: Free Press/Simon & Schuster, 2006), 58.
- ⁷⁴ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 105.
- ⁷⁵ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, 163.
- ⁷⁶ Steven Hawking, *A Brief History of Time* (New York: Bantam Press, 1998), 210.
- ⁷⁷ As told to me by Rev. Pat Bumgardner during a class presentation at EDS in June 2008.
- ⁷⁸ Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Theology: God, the World, and Global Warming*, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 2008, 105.
- ⁷⁹ Sourced from memory of the teachings of French Jesuit Catholic theologian Pierre Teilhard de Chardin
- ⁸⁰ Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 211.
- ⁸¹ Jonathan Saks, *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations* (New York: Continuum, 2002), 8.
- ⁸² Ivone Gebara, *Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Liberation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 137.
- ⁸³ Kwok, Pui-lan, "Postcolonial Imagination: Historical, Dialogical, and Diasporic", in *idem, Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 29, 30
- ⁸⁴ Christopher Duraisingh, *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed. Ian Douglas (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), 129.
- ⁸⁵ Lamen Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1989), 27. quoted by Christopher Duraisingh, *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed. Ian Douglas (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), 174.
- ⁸⁶ Christopher Duraisingh *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed. Ian Douglas (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), 129.
- ⁸⁷ Diana Butler Bass *Christianity for the Rest of Us: How the Neighborhood Church is Transforming the Faith* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), 149.
- ⁸⁸ Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity for the Rest of Us*, 149
- ⁸⁹ C.S. Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 37.
- ⁹⁰ Alice Morgan, *What is narrative therapy?* (Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications: 2000), 2.
- ⁹¹ C.S. Song, *The Believing Heart: An Invitation to Story Theology*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 40.
- ⁹² Speed dating is a social phenomenon where single people gather for ten minute conversations with multiple dates in hopes of meeting one or two potential partners in the course of a speed-dating session.
- ⁹³ Reference to former Vice President Al Gore's award winning documentary on global warming "An Inconvenient Truth."
- ⁹⁴ Denise Ackermann, *Waging Reconciliation: God's Mission in a Time of Globalization and Crisis*, ed., Ian Douglas, (New York: Church Publishing Incorporated), 151.
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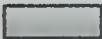
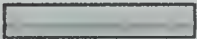
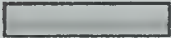
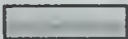

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
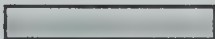


Appendix

Incarnational Diversity Survey



1. When I think of diversity, I think of: (Select all that apply)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Differences from my own cultural background or ethnicity		28.2%	33
Differences in viewpoint from my own		12.0%	14
Differences in religious belief or practice		23.9%	28
Differences in sexual orientation		20.5%	24
Differences in economic class or political affiliation		15.4%	18
All of the above		77.8%	91
Other (please specify)			5
		answered question	117
		skipped question	0





2. I find that I am uncomfortable when I am in the presence of difference. (Select all that apply)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		6.0%	7
No		26.5%	31
Not usually but sometimes		66.7%	78
I worry that difference will lead to conflict		7.7%	9
Other (please specify)			4
		answered question	117
		skipped question	0



3. I am energized in the presence of difference.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		72.4%	84
No		27.6%	32
<i>answered question</i>			116
<i>skipped question</i>			1

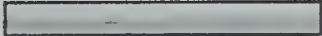
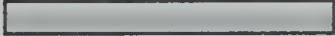

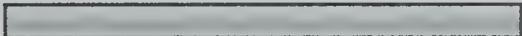
4. In your opinion, do people generally look for churches where the people attending are similar to themselves; where they either believe the same things or come from similar backgrounds? (Select all that apply)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		65.5%	72
No		0.9%	1
Ideally yes but it can be difficult		11.8%	13
That used to be very common but I think it is less so today		21.8%	24
Other (please specify)			7
<i>answered question</i>			110
<i>skipped question</i>			7



5. I have left at least one church, job, or organization in my life because people had ideas, beliefs and practices that were different than my own.

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes		62.4%	73
No		37.6%	44
<i>answered question</i>			117
<i>skipped question</i>			0

6. I find fulfillment being a part of a church or faith community that: (select all that apply)

		Response Percent	Response Count
Has different religious beliefs and yet is united in working for a common cause		40.0%	42
Gathers for common prayer rather than same doctrine		41.9%	44
Is very diverse, a community where I can get to know different kinds of people		51.4%	54
Includes people with at least one major thing in common with me (sexual orientation, social class, educational background, political affiliation or religious tradition)		65.7%	69
	Other (please specify)		18
	<i>answered question</i>		105
	<i>skipped question</i>		12

7. The diversity found within humanity and in nature is evidence of the Creator's hand.

		Response Percent	Response Count
I believe that to be true		92.0%	103
I do not believe that is true		8.0%	9
	Other (please specify)		5
	<i>answered question</i>		112
	<i>skipped question</i>		5

8. What comment or reaction do you have to the following statements: "Diversity is part of God's creative design. Each of us has a different and an important role to play in bringing wholeness and liberation to this world."

	Response Count
	105
answered question	105
skipped question	12

9. If we are each created in the image of God and yet each of us is different, is the nature of God diverse?

		Response Percent	Response Count
Yes, that seems logical to me	<div></div>	87.7%	93
No, I don't think that is true	<div></div>	4.7%	5
I don't know	<div></div>	7.5%	8
	Other (please specify)		18
	answered question		106
	skipped question		11

10. What would be the positive implications of believing that diversity is part of God's design and that each of us is a unique incarnation of the God who created us? (Select all that apply)

		Response Percent	Response Count
It would mean that seeing God in each persons face is real and not just a nice thought	<div></div>	75.2%	85
It would mean that we are in the presence of God when we are in the presence of one another	<div></div>	79.6%	90
It would motivate me to try to get along with all people	<div></div>	52.2%	59
It could have an effect on world peace	<div></div>	62.8%	71
It would mean that everyone is "neighbor" and no one is "other"	<div></div>	72.6%	82
	Other (please specify)		18
	answered question		113
	skipped question		4

Diversity Survey

1. About this Survey and Topic

Thank you for your willingness to take this ten question survey. It is part of my research on the topic of diversity. I use the term diversity to refer to any and all differences of belief, values, culture, class or expression. It is aimed primarily at people of faith. Looking at our multi-cultural and pluralistic world, my thesis project asks the question, "Is diversity evidence of crisis or God's greatest imagination?" I am looking for your thoughts, reactions and comments to questions and statements that follow.

1. Diversity refers to: (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Differences from my own cultural background or ethnicity
- ☐ Differences in viewpoint from my own
- ☐ Differences in religious belief or practice
- ☐ Differences in sexual orientation
- ☐ Differences in economic class or political affiliation
- ☐ All of the above

2. I am uncomfortable when I am in the presence of difference. (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Not usually but sometimes
- ☐ I worry that too much difference will lead to conflict

3. I am energized in the presence of difference.

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

4. In your opinion, do people generally look for churches where the people attending are similar to themselves? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Ideally yes but it can be difficult
- ☐ That used to be very common but I think it is less so today

Diversity Survey

5. I have left at least one church, job, or organization in my life because people had ideas, beliefs and practices that were different than my own.

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. I find fulfillment being a part of a church or faith community that: (select all that apply)

☐ Has different religious beliefs and yet is united in working for a cause such as social justice

☐ Gathers for common prayer rather than same doctrine

☐ Is very diverse, a community where I can get to know different kinds of people

☐ Includes people with at least one major thing in common with me (sexual orientation, social class, educational background, political affiliation or religious tradition)

7. The diversity found within humanity and nature is evidence of the Creator's hand.

☐ I believe that to be true

☐ I do not believe that is true

**8. What comment or reaction do you have to the following statements:
"Diversity is part of God's creative design. Each of us has a different and an important role to play in bringing wholeness and liberation to this world."**

9. If we are each created in the image of God and yet each of us is different, is God diverse?

☐ Yes, that seems logical to me

☐ No, I don't think that is true

☐ I don't know

Diversity Survey

10. What would be the positive implications of believing that diversity is part of God's design and that each of us is a unique incarnation of the God who created us? (Select all that apply)

- ☐ It would mean that seeing God in each face is real and not just a nice thought
- ☐ It would mean that we are in the presence of God when we are in the presence of one another
- ☐ It would motivate me to try to get along with all people
- ☐ It could have an effect on peace
- ☐ It would mean that everyone is "neighbor" and no one is "other"

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